

# Child Snatcher

by Syl

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Summary: Nightwing and Batman go on the trail of a child serial killer, a killer from Dick's past!

## 1. Prologue and Chapter 1

**\*\*Summary\*\***: Nightwing goes on the trail of child serial killer. In the process he comes to face to face with a forgotten episode in his own past.

**\*\*Dedication\*\***: I'd like to dedicate this story to the memory of Dannell Lites who early on became a cyber-friend and beta-read this story and several others for me. Her incisive comments and critical feedback were always blessedly honest and finely attuned to not just what I wanted to achieve, but more importantly, what was 'right' for the characters. She was a good friend, a wonderful writer, and I will miss her. Our cyber-world will surely be a far dimmer place without her illuminating presence.--Syl Francis, October 2002

**\*\*Warning\*\***: This work is rated M for mature language and situations! The subject matter may be offensive to some and is definitely not recommended for younger readers!

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><p><strong>Child Snatcher<strong>

by Syl Francis

"Man is worse than an animal when he is an animal." (Rabindranath Tagore)

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## ><p><strong>Prologue<strong>

Eight-year-old Danny parked his bicycle right outside Browne's Stop and Go. His excitement was almost palpable. Today was Wednesday, and that meant that Browne's would have a new shipment of comic books. Danny had been waiting all month long for the latest issue of Daredevil!

"Hi, Mister Browne!" Danny said as he walked in. "Are they in?"

Browne smiled distractedly; he was busy with a customer.

"In the back, Danny!" Browne replied, waving his hand towards the rear of the store where the magazines were displayed. Browne liked Danny. He was a regular customer and a nice, well-behaved boy, but Browne didn't have time to chat at the moment.

The hours between 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. were usually the store's busiest period. People rushing home from work, stopped to buy what they needed to make it to the end of the week and the next grocery shopping day.

Danny smiled his thanks, impatiently pushed back his dark bangs, which always seemed to fall over his eyes, and hurried towards the back. As he made his way to the comics rack, Danny didn't notice a pair of malevolent eyes following him.

"That'll be ten ninety-six, sir," Browne said. "Sir?"

The customer turned immediately and handed Browne fifteen dollars. Browne took the money.

"Okay, sir, that's ten ninety-six out of fifteen dollars. Your change is--" He stopped, startled. His customer had suddenly grabbed his purchases and was already walking out without waiting for his change.

"Wait! Sir! Your change! Sir!" Browne ran outside. He saw his customer jump into the passenger side of a dark van with tinted windows. Browne tried waving, but soon gave up.

Automatically he checked the license plate. He could just barely make out the first three letters: XLJ. The last three figures were obscured.

"Talk about weird." Browne shook his head then hurried back inside. When he stepped in, Browne saw that Danny was waiting for him.

"This is gonna be the best issue yet, Mister Browne," Danny said, his dark blue eyes lighting up excitedly. "I hope when I grow up that I can be a superhero just like Daredevil!"

"But Danny," Browne said. "Daredevil is only make-believe. Wouldn't you rather be a real superhero like Superman or the Flash?"

"I guess they're okay, too," Danny said shrugging his shoulders. "But DD is way cooler!"

Browne smiled.

"You're the expert, Danny!" Browne said. "I only sell 'em. I don't read 'em!"

Danny shook his head. He just couldn't understand how anyone could work with comic books and never read them. What a waste!

Along with the latest Daredevil, Danny also bought a root beer, a bag of tortilla chips, and Gummi Bears.

"Looks like you're all set for a quiet afternoon of reading and snacks, Danny," Browne said.

Danny smiled.

"Today's my Mom's day pick up my baby sister at the daycare. I promised her I'd go straight home from school, but I hadda get Daredevil first."

Danny's voice suggested that were some things in life just too important to be put off. He shrugged.

"Mom won't mind . . . Too much. I hope." Danny gave Browne another bright smile. Noticing another customer standing patiently behind him, Danny hurriedly collected his purchases and headed out. He paused at the door, his back to it, and called out happily.

"See you next week, Mister Browne!" Next week, the latest issue of Captain America would come out.

Browne smiled in turn. He really liked Danny and hoped the boy wouldn't get in too much trouble with his mother for not going straight home.

Oh well, what harm could there be in stopping here first? The store was only a half-mile from Danny's neighborhood, Blud Acres. Browne was sure that Danny's mother would understand. He'd hate to lose his favorite customer.

"Take care, Danny!" Browne called, waving goodbye. "What a great kid!" He added as he turned to his next customer.

That was the last time anyone saw Danny alive.

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><p><strong>Chapter One<strong>

The multi-agency task force rivaled that of the Atlanta Child Murders. This was week ten in what had turned into a nightmare for the parents and children of Bludhaven. In those ten weeks there had been four disappearances, all of boys between the ages of six and ten, all in broad daylight, and in each case, no eyewitnesses.

The nude bodies of the victims were later found dumped off the highway near and in the Gotham River Gorge, which ran along the evergreen tree-lined exclusive area of Bludhaven Heights. In each case, the remains were placed in a black plastic garbage bag.

The child kidnappings were what the FBI termed "low-risk victim, high-risk crime." Low-risk victim because the children were too small to put up any real resistance; high-risk crime because the kidnapping occurred in broad daylight and in the child's own neighborhood. In one case, the victim was snatched from his own front yard.

The relative youthfulness of the boys taken indicated an unknown suspect, or UNSUB, in his mid-twenties to late-thirties, white, of above average intelligence, probably unemployed or employed in a menial job. The profile fit that of a male, with a low sense of self-esteem, and problems dealing with relationships with his peers.

Dr. Lauren Winters, the BHPD criminal profiler surmised that what the Bludhaven police department had was an individual who had long fantasized about having sexual relations with little boys. He'd probably molested little boys before, and probably had prior convictions for child molestation. He might have even served time for it; however, it was unlikely that he'd killed before, or at least, he hadn't been caught before.

Something recent in his personal relationships, a recent stressor, perhaps the loss of a job, a divorce or break-up had set him off. Perhaps he'd been serving time in prison and was only recently released.

The profile suggested that the UNSUB probably cruised the streets for hours on the hunt, looking for likely victims. The children taken were probably targets of opportunity. In each case, if a car had driven by at the moment that the snatch was about to take place, or if someone had just happened to walk by, then in all likelihood, the child would not have been taken. In each case, the victim was probably just at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The UNSUB obviously had a vehicle of some sort, because he had to have some way of approaching his victims and transporting them to wherever he was holding them, and later to wherever he was dumping them.

A dark van, the vehicle of preference for child kidnappings nationwide, was seen in the vicinity of where the first victim, eight-year-old Danny O'Brien, was taken. The police had a partial tag, but so far, nothing had turned up.

Whoever the UNSUB was, the viciousness of the crimes, the premortem wounds inflicted on the children, bespoke of a monster who enjoyed torturing his victims prior to killing them.

The postmortem disposal of the remains, bathed thoroughly to eliminate forensic evidence, indicated a person who was methodical and had thought long and hard on just how to carry out his reign of terror. By disposing of his victims in garbage bags, the killer was showing that, once they were dead and he'd taken whatever pleasure he could from them, the boys were nothing more than garbage to him. He

was still demonstrating his domination and contempt for his victims.

Autopsies indicated that the victims were alive for several days after their kidnapping. In at least two instances, the victims had been alive until shortly before their bodies had been found. In one case, the child had been alive as shortly as eighteen hours before.

The knowledge that the victims were alive and suffering horribly in the hands of this monster galvanized the task force to Herculean efforts . . .

\* \* \*

><p>"That's it, Cadets. Do I have any questions?" Captain David MacCauley looked out at the sea of fresh, young faces. A twenty-year veteran with the BHPD, MacCauley was Chief of the Violent Crimes Division and officer in charge of the special taskforce investigating the Bludhaven Child Murders, as the case was now being called by the local media.<p>

Was I ever that young, MacCauley wondered.

A few hands went up. MacCauley called on each cadet and tried to answer his or her questions patiently.

"What makes you so certain that the UNSUB is white?" a young African-American police cadet asked.

"It's been our experience that most serial rape/killings are personal, not racist or politically motivated. Also, we've found that the perps tend to stay within their own racial lines. Again, this is a personal action. Therefore, we can expect that the killer or killers would select a type of victim with whom he'd feel most comfortable."

"What makes you so sure that the UNSUB is male?" asked a pretty young female cadet.

"Despite what you may see on television, most serial killers are male. Only on extremely rare occasions do we have a female perpetrator. And then they're usually associated with mysterious deaths in hospitals or nursing homes. Usually what they deem to be mercy killings. If a woman is involved in the murder of a child, it's usually her own."

MacCauley paused, then added almost gently, "Also, the semen samples taken from the bodies are a sort of giveaway." The female cadet blushed furiously at her mistake, and at her fellow cadets' laughter. MacCauley raised his hand for quiet.

"That's okay, cadet. Remember, there's no such thing as a dumb question." The young cadet smiled gratefully, but couldn't bring herself to look him in the eyes again.

MacCauley paused and looked around once more.

"Are there any further questions?"

Another hand went up. MacCauley noticed that it belonged to the only cadet who'd taken notes during his briefing. MacCauley made it clear at the start that the cadets would not be tested on the information they were going to discuss. He'd smiled ruefully as they all immediately closed their notebooks.

All, that is, except this one. He nodded at the cadet to proceed. As the young man spoke, MacCauley had an eerie feeling that he'd seen him or spoken to him before.

"Sir, Cadet Grayson," he said by way of introduction. "Has a DNA analysis been run on the semen samples and do they match a single UNSUB? Also, do we have any matching DNA fingerprints on file?"

MacCauley studied the young cadet admiringly.

"Those are two excellent questions, Cadet Grayson," MacCauley said. "However, there are certain details of the case that we cannot release at this moment. I'm sorry." MacCauley smiled. Then, his eyes hardening, he addressed the assembly again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's been my experience during twenty years on the force, with ten of those years serving in the Violent Crimes Division, that there is no bottom, no lowest point, to which an offender can stoop."

MacCauley paused to gauge the effect of his words. He had the cadets' undivided attention. "Good," he said to himself. "It's about time someone kicked them in the teeth with a taste of reality! How many of these kids joined the force for the 'glamour'?" he wondered sardonically.

"When you think you've seen the worst possible example of depravity committed by one human being against another, something worse comes along. This child murder case is the worst I've seen in my career. I'm only sorry to say that tomorrow another case will come along that will top it."

MacCauley could've heard a pin drop in the classroom. The cadets' youthful, wide-eyed stares showed him that many were suddenly reevaluating their career choice.

"Are there any further questions?" He paused for a beat, and when no more hands went up, MacCauley smiled and nodded his head.

"Very well. The purpose of this briefing wasn't just to help you see how the BHPD is currently handling this terrible case, or to give you a break from your PAIs' instruction on how to properly conduct a 'routine' traffic stop."

MacCauley's quip broke the tension in the classroom and was met with brief laughter. The Police Academy Instructors were currently trying to impress on the cadets that there was no such thing as a routine traffic stop. Each stop was potentially dangerous.

"I asked your PAIs to allow me to speak to you today, because quite frankly, we're at a dead end. I ask each of you to keep your eyes and ears open. Anything that you see or hear, no matter how insignificant a detail, that you feel might lend some insight into helping us solve this case will be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time,

ladies and gentlemen."

As MacCauley began to gather his notes, Cadet Grayson approached him. MacCauley gave him a questioning look.

"Yes, Cadet Grayson?" he asked. MacCauley scrutinized the young man. Again, he felt that there was something palpably familiar about Grayson.

"I was curious about the possibility of there being two suspects, rather than one," Dick asked as preamble. "It seems that would make sense especially if the children are being snatched in broad daylight and not far from their own homes. One would do the snatching, while the other drove the getaway vehicle."

"Excellent observation, Grayson," MacCauley said impressed by the young man's keen insight. "That's something we've already discussed. We feel fairly certain that there are two perpetrators, with one being the dominant, the other one the follower. Some of the guys on the case have dubbed them 'Batman and Robin'. You know, leader and sidekick."

Dick managed not to let his startled reaction to the detective's words show.

"Yes, sir," he said instead, holding onto his temper. "I think I know exactly what you mean. Thank you for answering my question." Dick turned as if to leave, but MacCauley stopped him.

"Wait! Cadet Grayson, have we met before?" he asked curiously.

Dick tensed immediately. Uh-oh, he thought. Take it easy, Grayson. We could've run across each other in the corridors here at the Academy. Play it cool, he told himself.

Dick shrugged his shoulders and shook his head as if trying to place MacCauley.

"I'm not sure, sir," he said, giving MacCauley his most guileless smile. "Maybe we've passed each other here in the hallways?"

MacCauley nodded his head, unconvinced. He'd noted immediately how the young man had tensed suddenly at the question. MacCauley decided to let the matter drop for now.

"You're probably right, Grayson. Keep your eyes and ears open!" MacCauley gathered his materials and left the room.

\* \* \*

><p>The wall in the Cadet Lounge was decorated with the smiling faces of Bludhaven's missing and murdered children. Bright eyes and gap-toothed smiles looked down on Cadet Grayson. Daniel Patrick O'Brien and three other boys smiled innocently at the world.<p>

In each case the child was taken less than a mile from his own home. Danny's bicycle and the purchases he'd bought were found in a ditch less than 500 yards from Browne's Stop and Go.

The eight-year-old smiled down with lively blue eyes. Dick noted a light smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose and wavy almost blue-black hair that flopped carelessly over his eyes. Danny had been a top student in his third grade class at Saints Peter and Paul. He was an altar server and wanted to grow up to be a superhero.

Studying the wall, Dick felt an icy hand grip the pit of his stomach. He looked into each boy's eyes. Four sets of piercing dark blue eyes stared back, almost accusingly. Dick stepped back and took in all four photos at once. He looked from to another, slowly at first, then faster. He walked to Danny, then to Jimmy. Nicky. Ryan. It couldn't be true.

But it was.

The boys were dead ringers for each other.

"He's looking for a particular type," Dick murmured, awed at his discovery. "He's looking for the same boy, over and over again."

Dick realized that this was another little piece of information that Captain MacCauley held back during his briefing.

Dick scrutinized the four photographs closer. There was something else, right here in front of him, but he couldn't place it. He finally shook his head in frustration. He decided to let it go for now. Whatever it was, it would come to him. Sooner or later.

"I'll find him," Dick silently promised the smiling faces. "Whatever it takes. I'll find whoever hurt you and took you from your families."

\* \* \*

><p>"Oh, man, Mikey, I don't like this!" Tommy whined. "I don't think this is such a good idea, man!"<p>

Bludhaven was crawling with cops. BHPD, Feds, County, and State cops were everywhere! The TV news guy said that the task force assembled was the second largest in US history.

"Shut up, Tommy!" Mikey said.

He was scanning the school bus stop for his next prize. It had been almost eight days since the last one, and Mikey was beginning to feel what he called the itch. The itch came on slowly. It usually began in the middle of the night and worked up to fever pitch by midday. With his need almost ready to explode, Mikey knew that it was time...

Time for another houseguest. The last one hadn't lasted long, and that made Mikey unhappy. He'd done everything for the ungrateful brat! He'd fed him, made sure he had enough water to drink, clean sheets to sleep in. But had he shown the least bit of gratitude? No!

He'd cried every time Mikey tried to show him how much he loved him. Mikey was forced to hit him! He hadn't wanted to, but the brat made



him! Mikey tried to make it up to him. He'd even helped him go the bathroom just to show him how much he loved him.

But in the end, Mikey was forced to take him to the punishment room, just like all the others...

"There!" Mikey said. Tommy looked in the direction Mikey was pointing. He saw a small, dark haired boy, about five or six, holding something carefully in one hand, as if afraid it might break, and lugging a heavy backpack in the other. The boy crossed the street at the crosswalk, and Tommy and Mikey followed him with their eyes. When the little boy turned the corner, Tommy started the van and Mikey jumped out to follow on foot.

Mikey felt the familiar adrenaline rush. In just a few more moments, he'd have his newest pet. Mikey walked with single-mindedness. He hurried to turn the corner and immediately caught sight of his prey. He was about to run up behind him and blitz him when a woman called, waving.

"Billy! Billy!"

The little boy waved back.

"Mommy!" Billy called excitedly, crossing the street and running up to his mother. "Guess what? My front tooth fell out during recess!" He held out the object that he'd been carefully holding in his right hand.

Billy's mother gently took the prize in her hand and inspected her son's gap-toothed smile. She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead, giving him a big hug.

"Oh, my! Look at that," she said smiling. "I guess we'll have to expect a visit from the tooth fairy tonight!" Laughing, mother and son turned to walk home together. They lived in a nice, well-manicured apartment complex.

Mikey witnessed the whole episode from behind a tree across the street. He could feel his rage growing. He wanted to kill the whore. How dare she interfere with his prize! The boy belonged to him! Mikey owned him, heart and soul. Mikey had half a mind to walk up to them, grab Billy, and kill the bitch who'd stolen his prize.

He'd be rescuing Billy wouldn't he? After all, all women were whores. They hurt little boys with electric cords and locked them in dark closets without food or water, didn't they? They made little boys wash in their own pee if they wet their beds, didn't they?

Mikey was about to go after them and rescue Billy, when Tommy drove up to him in the van.

"Come on, Mikey," Tommy said. "Get in! We've gotta blow!" Tommy was looking around nervously, expecting any one of those cops to suddenly turn the corner and stop them on suspicion.

Mikey nodded and reluctantly climbed in the van.

"Okay, Tommy," Mikey conceded. "We won't take him today. But we'll be back."

I'll be back, Billy, he promised silently.

As they drove back to the abandoned building they'd converted into their living quarters, Mikey remembered Dicky, the first and only prize that ever got away. Dicky was the most beautiful boy that Mikey had ever laid eyes on, then or since.

From the first moment he'd seen him, Dicky's raven hair and dark, piercing blue eyes were forever seared in Mikey's psyche. Mikey knew then that he'd never rest until he possessed him.

He'd had him, too. Mikey was about to show Dicky how much he loved him, when the Batman stole him, probably to take him for himself. Mikey remembered that soon afterwards, Batman had a partner that he called "Robin." Mikey saw immediately how much Robin resembled Dicky, and more importantly, he noticed how Robin's acrobatic moves were exactly the same as the ones that Dicky had executed in his presence.

Yes, Mikey knew. Dicky, the one who got away, became Robin, the Boy Wonder. Mikey swore that he'd get his prize back.

Sooner or later.

That's all Mikey fantasized about in the ensuing years while serving time in Blackgate Prison. He'd dreamed about what he'd do to Dicky once he got out of prison, in order to show the boy how much he still loved him and forgave him for leaving.

Of course, Mikey had to punish Dicky for what he did. But Dicky would understand. After all, you only hurt the ones you loved. Isn't that what Mommy always used to say?

Mikey grinned happily. He wondered if Dicky could hear him calling to him. He was practically sending him a telegram. If he knew Dicky, he'd catch on eventually.

Then he'll come looking for me, Mikey told himself. Dicky will return to me of his own free will. All I have to do is sit back and wait.

And keep sending him human telegrams.

End of Part 1

## 2. Chapters 2 & 3

### **\*\*Chapter Two\*\***

He finds himself barefoot and naked in a place he doesn't know. Everything is so big and dark. He looks down at his feet. They're both so small. On impulse, he holds out hands that are now child-sized. He turns them slowly, inspecting them in silent awe.

He feels cold and wet and hurt and tired.

Where am I, he wonders, perplexed? His keen, analytical mind tries to fight through the childlike confusion.

I'm dreaming, he decides.

The scene shifts.

Suddenly, he can't move! His arms are tied behind him! He tries jerking them free, but it only makes him hurt more.

Where am I? Why am I here?

"Mom? Dad?" he calls, but no one answers. "Mom! Dad!"

"They're not heeerreere, Dicky," the Voice in Dark says. "Just me."

He breaks out in a cold sweat. He's frozen in terror. He remembers the Voice. It belongs to a demon from the past. The Voice is enough to make him lose self-control.

"Aw, did widdle Dicky wet his widdle pants?" the Voice mocks.

He starts to cry. He's ashamed of himself for losing control.

"It's just you and me, Dicky. They didn't love you like I do. That's why they left you. Tonight, I'm going to show you how much I love you..."

The scene changes. He finds himself flying across space. Suddenly, he feels the reassuring grasp of his father. The audience explodes into applause.

"Nice work, son! Your Mom and I are very proud of you!"

"That's right, little Robin," his Mom says. He looks up startled. She's sitting on the swing with his Dad. She wasn't there a second ago.

"We're both so proud of you...And we love you...Remember that, sweetheart. We'll love you always!"

They wave happily as they plunge to their deaths.

"NO-OOO-OO!" he yells helplessly...

"DON'T SCREAM!" The Voice rages at him. He can feel the demon's hot breath on his neck. His entire body is in searing, white-hot pain! His screams go up another octave.

As the brutal violation continues, the Voice changes tactics, and starts talking in more soothing tones, a mother's crooning with loving words of endearment. He tries to claw his way free, but he's being pinned in place by strong arms and large callused hands. The pain continues unabated, his sobs become the whimpers of a wounded puppy.

He looks down and sees one of the monstrous hands clasped across his exposed abdomen. The other is obscenely fondling him where no one is allowed to touch him. No! That's not allowed! His Mom and Dad told him so!

"NO-000-00!"

He squeezes his eyes shut to make it all go away, but before he can block out the horror, an attacking cobra slithering out of a skull's empty eye socket suddenly seems to leap out at him. He feels another scream of terror form in his throat.

"NO-000-00! Help me, Bruu-uu-ucce--!"

\* \* \*

><p>"--BRUCE! HELP ME!"<p>

"Grayson! Wake up!"

Dick jerked awake, his cries cutting off at mid-shout. Abruptly, he sat up in his bunk, soaking wet, entangled in his sheets. He felt his heart thumping rapidly in his chest, his breathing in short, ragged gasps. Tonight was the fourth night in row that he'd awakened from a nightmare; however, this one had been the most terrifying.

Dick ran a shaky hand through his dark hair. It felt dank and matted from sweat. He could actually feel rivulets of perspiration trickling down his temples, his chest, and his back.

"Oh, God," Dick whispered. What a nightmare! It was so real. He could still feel his whole body trembling from the remembered terror.

"Hey, buddy, are you okay?" Cadet O'Hara asked concernedly. Dick nodded, unable to speak. "Are you sure?"

Dick finally found his voice.

"Yeah," he managed to croak. "Thanks, I'll be all right." O'Hara looked at him a moment longer, then seemingly satisfied, returned to his own bunk.

Dick sat in his bunk a moment longer, then got up and went to the latrine. What a nightmare! He could recall being terrified and crying for his mother and father, and for Bruce. But the dream was fading quickly with each passing moment. He splashed water in his face to clear his head.

"Okay, Grayson, take it by the numbers. The way you've been taught." He spoke calmly in order to slow down his rapidly beating heart.

"It was only a dream. It can't hurt you. Cadet, report!"

Dick stared at his multiple reflections in the wall of mirrors that lined the Men's latrine. There were four mirrors hung at exactly eye level. Dick could see his reflection in all four. Four sets of pain-filled, piercing dark blue eyes stared back at him. Dark, tousled, matted hair hung carelessly over his eyes.

A cold fear began to grip him slowly. Something half-remembered, hidden in his subconscious was sending warning bells. But what? He took a deep, calming breath, closed his eyes, and began to resurrect the dream from the darker recesses of his mind, the secret place where memories that were best forgotten often lay in wait...

He remembered the Voice in his head.

"DON'T SCREAM!"

It was chilling and full of rage at the same time.

He'd being paralyzed with terror. His cries choking in his throat. Eventually, he'd found his own voice and screamed out his outrage at the overwhelming pain and violation.

"DON'T SCREAM!"

He felt huge, rough hands closing around his throat and over his mouth, choking back his cries, suffocating him. He felt himself thrashing in desperation, clawing at the hands on his face. He couldn't breathe!

Dick closed his eyes, feeling the tears start to well.

"This didn't happen," he whispered. "This never happened!"

Dick stood leaning forward, straight-armed, hands on either side of the mirror facing him. He was shaking his head in violent denial of the scene playing in his head.

The Voice became endearing, crooning, almost a singsong.

"I only want to show you how much I love you, Dicky. You're mine now. We're one heart and soul--"

"--Grayson?"

Dick spun at the sound of his name, his heart racing. The sergeant on night duty was standing at the door.

"Grayson, are you all right?" he asked. "I thought I heard voices in here."

Dick nodded and quickly splashed water on his face again.

"Uh, yes, Sergeant...I was just having trouble sleeping," he said, grabbing a towel to dry his face. "I'm all right."

"Well, get some sleep, Cadet," the sergeant ordered. "You've got a full day tomorrow."

"Yes, sergeant," Dick replied. "I will."

As soon as the sergeant left, Dick splashed some more cold water on his face. His hands were shaking.

"Get a grip, Grayson," he muttered. "It was just a dream." Dick stared in silent rage at his reflection and pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"You were never raped! You hear me? NEVER!!"

When there was no response from his mirror-self, Dick grasped the lavatory with a white-knuckled grip and leaned forward until he was

nose to nose with his reflection.

"You escaped, Grayson! Remember? Batman saved you! You were never raped!"

His face stared back at him.

"But how I be sure?" Dick asked himself. "It all happened so long ago. So much that happened immediately following Mom and Dad's deaths are just a blur now."

Dick knew that he'd probably suppressed the greater part of what had occurred to him during this time period. There'd been so much pain and terror and grief that it was only natural that his subconscious had finally locked it away until he was ready to face it.

"Is that what's happening? Is my subconscious telling me that I'm ready to face a childhood trauma that I found so personally violating I've been unable to come to terms with it before now?"

His kidnappers had drugged him, Dick reminded himself.

"Can most of these images be some kind of false, drug-induced memory?" Dick couldn't be sure, but he knew with a growing urgency that sleep was the last thing he wanted at the moment.

What Dick wanted was to talk to Bruce. More than anything else at the moment, Dick Grayson needed to talk to his father. He quietly climbed out of the second story window, and easily made his way to the rooftop eaves of the Bludhaven Police Academy men's dormitory.

Dick found the bundle he'd hidden there several weeks ago at the start of what he ruefully called the Great Experiment. He quickly took out a special light weave Nomex/Kevlar suit, black with a stylized, midnight blue wing across the chest.

Dick dressed rapidly in the moonless night. He performed a few stretching exercises and deep knee bends, and satisfied that the fit was comfortable, he ran to the edge of the roof, and dove off into the emptiness. Dick closed his eyes momentarily, enjoying the rushing air during free fall. Instinctively, he tucked, rolled, straightened and reached out with his right hand.

At that exact moment, he made contact with the flagpole immediately outside the academy's main entrance. Dick grinned slightly, then did a fireman's slide down the flagpole. He hit the ground running. Wouldn't do to be caught on the academy grounds dressed like this.

Nightwing had too many enemies in the BHPD.

"Oh well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!" Dick quipped.

\* \* \*

### ><p><strong>Chapter Three<strong>

Dick quietly entered his apartment through his bedroom window. He moved quickly through the room, crossed into the living room, and made his way over to his computer console. He turned on his system,

waited for it to boot up, and then promptly went online. He checked his triple security measures, keyed in his secret password and waited.

"Boy Wonder, it's one-thirty in the morning! Can't you ever contact me at a decent hour?" Barbara's annoyed face stared at him from his monitor.

Dick smiled, removing his mask.

"Yeah, but who ever said I was decent?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. Barbara snorted in response.

"So, what I can do for you, Nightwing?" Oracle asked, becoming all business; then smiling impishly added, "And why aren't you asleep in your bunk like a good little police cadet?"

Dick ran his hand through his dark hair, an unconscious habit he'd had since he was a small boy. He gave her a tired grin.

"I wanted you to help me contact Bruce. I've been out of the net for a few days, and you know how he's always changing his protocols." He looked at her guiltily. "I'm sorry to get you out of bed just for this, Babs, but it's really important."

Barbara was about to say something biting, but held her tongue at his look of utter exhaustion. His demeanor bespoke of pain, desperation, and profound sadness.

"I'm on it, Dick," she said. "This'll take a few minutes. Why don't you catch some z's while you wait. I'll call you when I've made contact."

"Thanks, Babs," Dick said gratefully. "You're the best."

"That's what I keep telling the JLA," she shot back, "but they won't raise my salary, the cheap bums!" Dick laughed at her weak attempt at humor.

"I'll talk to Bruce about it, okay? I hear he's in real tight with the money men."

Barbara smiled in turn. Abruptly, her beautiful face was replaced with her Oracle icon. A banner line scrolled steadily across the screen: "I am the Oracle: All seeing, all knowing. What is your question?"

"What happened to me, Bruce?" Dick murmured, as he fell back exhausted. "What happened to me all those years ago?"

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm so sorry, Master Dick, but Master Bruce is currently out," Alfred said. Despite the primitiveness of their post-quake living conditions, Alfred still managed to maintain his urbane aplomb.<p>

"The Penguin has been up to his old tricks again. Trading fresh fruit for ammunition. It's almost caused a riot in his area. I'm afraid I don't know when the Master will return."

Dick's face fell at his words. Alfred looked worriedly at his younger charge.

"And what of you, Master Dick?" he scolded gently. "You're looking a mite peaked, young man. When is the last time you had a full night's sleep? Even a superhero has to recharge his batteries every now and then."

Dick smiled at the "looking a mite peaked" comment. Only Alfred could get away with such a quaint expression.

"I'm all right, Alfred," Dick said unconvincingly. "I just need to talk to Bruce." He stopped, choking on his words, unable to continue.

"Can you please get him to give me a call?" Dick finally managed.

His simple request sounded more like a cry for help, even to Dick. He tried to camouflage the naked agony in his voice by giving Alfred his best boyish grin. He knew he was failing miserably, though.

"I shall most certainly endeavor do exactly that, Master Dick," Alfred said comfortingly. "You have my word."

"Thanks, Alfred," Dick said raggedly, barely holding on to his emotions. He covered his eyes quickly, feeling a well of anguish building inside him. Just seeing Alfred's face made Dick want to be held in his arms again, just like when he was nine, before Dick deemed that he'd grown too old for "little kid stuff" like that.

Dick broke the connection at his end and quickly shut down his system. He didn't want Babs trying to call him back. He couldn't face any member of his family at the moment. He looked at the time. If he allowed himself three hours sleep, he'd be able to make it back to the dormitory in plenty of time for morning calisthenics.

He remembered the nightmares that were plaguing his dreams and opted instead to patrol the Bludhaven night...

\* \* \*

><p>Nightwing looked down from the shadows cast by the higher buildings on either side of him. He'd observed the nightly promenade of Bludhaven's evening denizens for the greater part of an hour. So far he hadn't spotted the one he was looking for.<p>

The Strip, as this particularly sleazy six-block stretch was known, was illuminated by the garishly bright neon lights of the many adults-only bars and theaters that lined it. The Strip's low-life residents blended in with their own outrageous clothing and over-the-top behavior.

"Yo mama!" a girlish, shrill voice called out.

Nightwing turned quickly to the sound. Bingo! Just the friendly neighborhood transvestite he was looking for. Damon Carter, also known as Sable on the street, was a transvestite male hooker who



could usually be found working this corner of the Strip. 'She' was gesticulating wildly at the driver of a late model Lincoln Mercury.

"Who d'you think you talkin' to? Some cheap trash from Kylie's stable? I'm a businesswoman, Mister John. You want some of this--"

She grabbed her crotch obscenely; Nightwing cringed in disgust, then grinned ruefully.

"--You fork over the Ben Franklins!"

The car screeched as it drove off. The flamboyantly dressed transvestite yelled obscene taunts at the cheap John who'd balked at her asking price.

"Think I'm doing this for my health? I got expenses, man!"

"I just bet you do, Sable." Sable spun at the quiet voice in the shadows. "And may I add that the pink boa looks absolutely fetching on you?"

Sable stood, hands on hips, under the blazing green and pink neon sign of the Pink Flamingo Nightclub. She sighed, as if extremely put out, then smiled broadly and walked suggestively towards the dark recesses afforded by the alleyways.

"You don't think the boa is too much?" Sable asked.

Grinning, Nightwing shook his head emphatically.

"I took it off some bitch that was trying to hustle on my corner," Sable explained. "A girl's gotta protect her territory."

"Oh, absolutely," Nightwing agreed, straight-faced.

"So, Wingster, sugah, what brings you here to The Strip? Lookin' for some action? If so, I'm just the girl to come to." As Sable spoke, 'she' kept walking closer to Nightwing, until 'she' had her hand on his chest, and her lips near his ear.

Nightwing felt himself blushing.

Sable always threw him off balance. She was so outrageously dressed and made up, that only the most naive could possibly mistake her for a woman. Yet, even though her gender was obvious to just about everyone, she was still the most popular hooker on The Strip.

Tonight Sable was dressed in a midriff exposing white leather number with matching white leather short shorts. She'd accessorized with black fishnet stockings and garters, three-inch high stiletto heels, and capped it all off with the ostentatious pink boa around her neck.

As much as Nightwing hated to admit it to himself, Sable looked pretty good. He cringed at the thought.

"I've gotta get Babs to go out a date!" Nightwing said to himself.

"The circus, maybe."

He looked nervously at Sable who was smiling meaningfully, and slowly tracing her hand down his chest.

"And soon." Very firmly, he caught her wrist and determinedly pushed her away.

"This is strictly business, Damon," Nightwing said, addressing the transvestite by his real name in his best Dark Knight imitation. "I'm not here for your idea of fun and games."

Sable puckered her lips at him and smiled from under heavily mascara'd false eyelashes.

"Fun 'n games is my business, Wingster," she said huskily. Nightwing glared at her silently. Sable pouted prettily, her disappointment obvious, but didn't protest.

"I need information on anyone hustling for kids. Young boys mostly. Can you help me?" Nightwing waited.

Sable stepped back and exploded in anger.

"You think because I dress like this and hustle on the streets that I'm some kind of pervert, Wingster? I know I'm not exactly the girl next door, but I don't do kids, and I don't do business with any short eyes, neither!"

"Short eyes?" Nightwing asked.

"Man, you don't know nothing do you?" Sable asked in disgust. "Look at you! The big, bad super-hero! You're no more than a kid yourself. What do you know about living on the streets? You observe the world from the rooftops, man, but you don't know nothing about us!"

"You're breaking my heart, Damon!" Nightwing growled, grabbing the transvestite by the boa. "What do you know about Johns peddling little boys?"

Sable glared at Dick for a long second, then pulled away angrily. She paced around the alley, fuming in silence. She finally turned, and looked accusingly at Nightwing.

"'Short eyes' is street slang for creeps who do kids. Pedophiles," Sable explained, exasperatedly. "Man, you are new at this. What's a matter, kid, Batman never teach you about the seamier side of life?"

Sable sighed not really expecting an answer.

"Wingster, this whole business is bad, man. Child killers are bad news. They're bad for business. Scare the Johns away. I mean, any pervert who'd do in a kid the way these monsters are doing, no telling who else they'd be willing to kill, right?"

Sable gave Dick a sad stare.

"Wingster, I chose my life, okay? I felt I had no choice really, but

I made my own decision. My old man used to...well, let's just say I finally had enough by the time I was twelve, so I left home. I've been on the streets ever since."

Sable's face twisted into an angry grimace.

"It's not a life I'd wish on a dog, much less another kid, so whenever I see some runaway out here, I try to help 'em out, see? Give 'em enough money to get off the streets, but it never works."

"Yeah, Damon, you're a real social worker," Nightwing jeered. "You help them all right. You help them straight into Kylie's stable, and get a percentage per head! Try that fairytale on your parole officer!"

Sable gave Nightwing a cold, calculating look, then grinning broadly, shrugged.

"Hey, it's business, man! I got expenses!"

Nightwing took slow measured steps towards her. When he was about four inches away, he leaned in closer. Sable took an involuntary step back.

"Are you going to help me?" Nightwing asked, quietly threatening. "Or am I going to have to run your Johns in for soliciting sex for money? Is that what you want, Damon? You want me to dry up your source of income? You know that I can turn this Strip into a desert in just a few days."

Nightwing glared menacingly at the transvestite.

"I'm getting these slimeballs off the street before they hurt another kid, Damon. Now, are you going to help me, or am I going to have to run you out of business?"

Sable returned Nightwing's glare for glare, but eventually began to feel her resolve start melting under the young vigilante's scrutiny. Finally, she nodded slowly.

"What do I have to do?" Sable asked resignedly.

"Just keep your eyes and ears open," Nightwing said, hurriedly giving her the same instructions that MacCauley gave the Cadets.

"If you hear anything...anything at all about someone trying to buy or sell kids, or kiddie porn...even if you hear something that sounds totally innocent, like someone who's suddenly buying up stuff that appeals to kids...any information like that could prove useful."

Nightwing walked up to Sable and handed her a business card.

"If you hear anything, call this number day or night and leave a message." Nightwing turned to go. "And Sable...thanks."

Nightwing quickly disappeared into the shadows.

Sable nodded, and grinned ruefully.

"Down girl," she said. "The Wingster's not your type. Too straight. Too law and order. He'd probably try to reform you or something. Oh well, nobody's perfect!"

Sable sauntered back to her street corner under the garish lights of the Pink Flamingo sign. One of Kylie's girls was already working her spot.

"Yo, bitch!" Sable screeched. "If you know what's go for you, you'll hustle your bony little tail out of my corner!"

"Oh, yeah?" the hooker taunted. "Who says?"

"I says!" Sable replied, and immediately launched herself at the interloper.

Nightwing looked down from the rooftops and grinned, shaking his head. He checked his wrist chronometer, which was hidden in his gauntlet. Another two hours to go before he had to return to the academy. Nightwing looked up, found a likely spot on a ledge, fired off a jump-line, and swung off into the endless night...

End of Part 2

### 3. Chapters 4 & 5

#### **\*\*Chapter Four\*\***

"Cadet Grayson!"

Dick turned bleary eyes at the sound of his name. An attractive woman was approaching him. Dick thought she looked familiar, but couldn't place her at first. Suddenly he remembered.

"Doctor Winters," he acknowledged, smiling his greeting. Dr. Lauren Winters smiled in return. She offered him her hand.

"It's a pleasure to see you again, Cadet," Winters said. "It's not often a damsel gets to thank her knight twice for saving her from the dragon."

Dick smiled.

"I was just doing my job, ma'am," he said self-effacingly. "You don't have to thank me every time you see me. I mean, I thought cops were supposed to help each other."

"You're right, Cadet," Winters admitted. "But frankly I never thought that as a police psychologist I'd ever need help!"

Dick laughed softly.

"I'm on my way to the cafeteria to grab a bite," Winters said. "Would you care to join me?" Dick nodded and they began walking in the direction of the crowded lunchroom.

"So how are your studies going, Cadet?" Winters asked politely. "How much longer till graduation?"

"My studies are going fine, ma'am. And we should be graduating in another five weeks."

"HMMMMM," Winters said. "That 'ma'am' stuff is making me feel like I'm about a hundred years old. How about if you call me 'Lauren'?"

"Only if you call me 'Dick'," he replied. "Deal?"

"Deal!" Winters agreed, sealing it with a handshake.

Unconsciously, Dick gave her what Babs called his "Lady Killer" smile. Winters felt herself momentarily taken aback by the sudden flush and weakness at the back of the knees.

Whoa, girl, she chastised herself. He's a good ten years younger and a police cadet! Abruptly, she gave Dick a clinical once over. After a brief moment, she decided that he was definitely not coming on to her. She observed how the women they passed on the corridor pulled double takes when they caught sight of him.

Most of them looked like they'd just been offered a free piece of eye candy, and immediately ate it up! Even some of the veteran female cops gave him a second look. A couple of women, believing they were out of earshot, made what could only be termed as sexist remarks.

Through it all, Dick seemed oblivious to the women around him, concentrating solely on Winters' conversation. Whatever else Cadet Grayson might be, Winters silently assessed, he was totally unaware of the effect he had on the members of the opposite sex.

Or, he blocked it out as an auto reaction. Or, he was a hell of an actor!

What an interesting young man, Winters thought!

They'd no sooner sat down, when a third party, Captain MacCauley, joined them.

"Lauren, Cadet Grayson!" MacCauley said, coming up to their table. "Mind if I join you?"

"David! What a pleasure!" Winters said. "Please, join us." Dick leaned over and pulled out a chair for MacCauley. MacCauley smiled his thanks.

"So, Lauren, what could possibly drag you away from your nice, cozy air-conditioned office over at Bludhaven General?" MacCauley teased.

Winters smiled easily. In addition to being a police psychologist and criminal behavioral profiler in the BHPD, Winters also worked part-time on the staff of Bludhaven General Hospital. Dick saw that she and MacCauley were obviously good friends.

"I've been asked to give the cadets a short presentation on criminal profiling. Apparently, they were given quite a shoddy briefing yesterday from some know-nothing Captain who left a trail of

confusion and misrepresentation."

"Ouch!" MacCauley said, holding his hands over his heart in mock pain. "Woman, you cut me to the quick!"

"Oh, was that you that the PAIs were bad mouthing so vociferously?" she asked.

"If I knew what 'vociferously' meant, maybe I could tell you one way or the other," MacCauley answered. "As it is, I'll have to settle for your unsubstantiated claim that the good sergeants were 'bad mouthing' me."

MacCauley shook his head in mock consternation.

"Slanderous lies! And here I gave them my best fifty-cent lecture. I even brought overhead slides."

MacCauley looked over towards Dick, who despite his exhaustion was thoroughly enjoying the exchange between the two senior officers.

"Didn't I, Cadet? Bring in teaching aids, I mean?"

Dick nodded, grinning.

"Yes, sir, you certainly did."

"Not that same moth-eaten slide you've been carrying with you to briefings for the past five years?" Winters scoffed.

"What's wrong with my slide?" MacCauley asked hurt. "It's a great slide!"

"Yeah, it's great all right," Winters said. "The top ten reasons why convicted criminals say they're not guilty!"

"It's still funny!" MacCauley insisted.

"It was funny," Winters said. "About a hundred years ago!"

"Oh yeah?" MacCauley challenged. "I'll prove to you that it's still funny."

"Oh, come on, David. Those jokes were old before your grandfather told them to you!"

"I tell you what," MacCauley replied. "We'll ask Cadet Grayson here what he thought! Grayson?" They both turned to Dick and immediately stopped.

Cadet Richard Grayson, BHPD, was sitting quietly, chin in hand, between the two veteran police officers, and sleeping soundly. Winters' eyes met MacCauley's and she carefully placed her finger on her lips. MacCauley nodded in acquiescence. It hadn't been that long ago that they'd been cadets. They each remembered that it had been a grueling six-month existence with little or no sleep.

"So how did you meet Cadet Grayson?" MacCauley asked curiously.

"He saved my life," Winters told him. Then quietly, so as not to disturb the sleeping Cadet, she gave MacCauley the story. After she finished, he looked over at Dick, impressed.

"Wow. Three thugs, and all by his lonesome? Either he's the gutsiest kid to have come along in quite some time, or the craziest!"

"Whatever he is, I owe him my life," Winters said. "I only hope that I'll be able to repay him sometime." Changing the subject, Winters inquired about his current case. MacCauley grimaced.

"It's bad, Lauren. I swear when I look at little Davey, I just want to handcuff him to me until he's thirty." He gave Winters a chagrinned look. "But what can you do? You can't lock up your own kid in order to protect him."

"No, but you can show him how to avoid becoming a victim," Winters said quietly. "You've done a terrific job with Davey. He's a great kid, David. You should be proud." MacCauley smiled.

"Thanks," he said. "I am." MacCauley checked his watch.

"Time for all good little cadets to report to Criminal Profiling One-Oh-One," he quipped. He raised a single brow at Winters.

"Shall we, Doctor?" he asked.

"I suppose we must," Winters said regretfully. "But I hate to wake him. Poor kid looks like he hasn't slept in about a month."

As Winters was about to reach over and wake him, Dick began stirring in his sleep. Suddenly, as Winters and MacCauley watched, Dick's face appeared to regress into that of a young child. Tears formed suddenly and began spilling unchecked.

"No," Dick whimpered in a little boy voice. "No, please, don't!"

He quickly became agitated by whatever monsters were invading his sleep. Winters realized that if they didn't wake him now, the young cadet would cause a scene in the cafeteria and undoubtedly embarrass himself.

"David! Wake him, now!" Winters ordered sharply. MacCauley nodded curtly and quickly reached across the table, shaking the younger man's shoulder. Dick jerked violently awake.

Dick looked around momentarily confused. Where was he? He saw Winters and MacCauley closely observing him. Winters' eyes showed obvious concern, while MacCauley's countenance was almost as inscrutable as Bruce's.

Dick swallowed suddenly. He felt trapped.

Winters quietly handed him a napkin. He took it gratefully and wiped his face.

"Thank you, ma'am," Dick whispered. What had just happened, he wondered?

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley sat in his office staring into space, hands behind his head, feet on his desk. Gradually, his eyes focused on the four smiling faces hanging on his bulletin board. Four smiling, dark haired, blue-eyed faces.<p>

As MacCauley casually studied each of the serial killer's victims, Cadet Grayson's face suddenly seemed to superimpose itself over each of the boys. The same boyish-looking, childlike face that MacCauley observed in the cafeteria during lunch appeared in his mind.

The same confused, pain-filled countenance that MacCauley saw on the face of each victim when the remains were first recovered.

"It couldn't be," MacCauley said to himself. "But it is! Same dark blue eyes, same hair color, same features. Even has the same light smattering of freckles...which probably stood out more when he was a kid. What if...?"

MacCauley hurried to his computer and quickly began running a search on past, similarly featured child kidnapping victims. He paused to estimate Cadet Grayson's age.

"Hmmm...Grayson's about twenty-two. Okay, I'll start my search twelve years ago, when he was about ten. That should fit the victim profile. Let's see, Grayson's home of record is Gotham City..."

\* \* \*

><p>"Dick, a word, please," Winters said, once the PAIs dismissed the cadets. Dick paused, his back to her. He turned slowly, focusing at a point behind her shoulder.<p>

"Dick, I'd like to have a talk with you," she said. Dick knew immediately that Winters didn't mean a social visit.

"Dick, I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to insist," Winters said regretfully. She hated sessions where the patient felt coerced. Exasperatedly, she walked up to him, forcing him to look her in the eye.

"Dick, you know that there's something wrong. You weren't just having a nightmare in the cafeteria. My professional guess is that you were experiencing repressed memories coming forward. Is that why you haven't been sleeping?"

At Dick's surprised look, Winters smiled.

"I don't have to be a trained clinical psychologist to notice the circles under your eyes. How long have you been having trouble sleeping?"

Dick looked down at his feet, ashamed of his weakness.

"About a week," he replied.

"And you haven't thought about seeking help?" Winters scolded. "Oh, never mind. I forgot. All you Police Cadet types think you're indestructible. Well, let me tell you a secret, Dick. You're not."



That's why the BHPD pays me all the big bucks. To make sure that its officers and officer cadets are of sound mind and body. And to help them, if and when they're having problems that could affect their work on the street."

Winters paused for effect, studying Dick's response.

"Now, will you come quietly, Cadet Grayson, or will I have to get rough?"

Dick had to laugh at her mock threat.

"I guess I'll come quietly, Officer," he replied smiling.

"Good, 'cause I don't know if I'm capable of carrying you!" she said.

"Perhaps not, but I am." Startled, Dick turned at the sound of the stern voice coming from the exit.

"Bruce!"

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Five<strong>

"You came!" Dick's eyes said silently.

Winters watched the interplay between the two men. Dick looked eager and pleased at the sight of "Bruce." Bruce appeared cold and distant at first glance, but on closer observation, Winters detected a slightly pleased look flash across his eyes.

Dick walked quickly up to Bruce and stopped. Both men stood stiffly apart, looking uncomfortably at each other.

"Dick," Bruce said quietly. He reached up tentatively and placed his hand comfortingly on the younger man's shoulder. Dick's whole demeanor changed to that of a drowning man who'd just been tossed a lifeline.

Bruce looked at Winters as if noticing her for the first time, and quirked an eyebrow in her direction. Winters couldn't be certain, but she had the distinct impression that there was very little that escaped this Bruce-guy's attention.

"I'm sorry," Dick apologized. "Let me introduce you. Doctor Lauren Winters, may I present my foster-father, Mister Bruce Wayne. Bruce, Doctor Winters is a police psychologist and criminal profiler. Lauren, Bruce is...well, he's my...my father."

Winters noticed Dick's look of uncertainty when he introduced his foster father, and the unsure glance he gave Bruce during the exchange. The younger man finally finished the introductions with a lame shrug. He was momentarily followed by an awkward silence.

Winters shook her head. She was obviously in the presence of two men

who had trouble relating their feelings for each other. "Time to spread a soothing balm over troubled waters," she said to herself.

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth, eh, Mister Wayne?" Winters asked. At Bruce's raised eyebrow, she laughed. "Dick sort of left out that you're the Bruce Wayne of Gotham City. Head of Wayne Enterprises." She tsked. "Kids today! They just don't appreciate their parents' accomplishments."

Bruce's mouth quirked in a half-smile, but his eyes burned intensely. He didn't have time for pleasantries.

"Doctor Winters, it's a pleasure, but if you will excuse us. I'd like to talk to Dick in private."

Winters had been dismissed before by her superiors, but in her entire professional life, she'd never felt quite so dismissed before. It was almost as if she wasn't even there.

Humph. I know when I've been insulted, Winters thought huffily. She was about to gather her materials and head out, when MacCauley walked in.

"Lauren, I'm glad I caught you," MacCauley said without preamble. "Cadet Grayson, I'd like a word with you. With the both of you, in fact!"

"It will have to wait, I'm afraid."

MacCauley turned to the source of the words. He looked at Bruce as if studying a specimen under a microscope. Finally, he grinned in recognition.

"Mister Bruce Wayne, I presume," he said. "Okay, you're invited, too. In my office. Now!" Bruce and Dick both blinked. MacCauley's invitation came in the form of an order and not a request.

\* \* \*

><p>Bruce and Dick sat cooling their heels in MacCauley's office. Dick could see Bruce rapidly losing patience. His mentor was sitting stiffly, legs crossed, hands steepled in front of him. Dick could see Bruce's thumbs beating an erratic tattoo while his dark forbidding eyes took in every detail in the office. Finally, those brooding eyes came to rest on him.<p>

Dick swallowed, nervously. Bruce could somehow always reduce him to adolescence with a single glance. Where the hell was MacCauley?

MacCauley had led them to his office, then at the last moment pulled Winters aside and told Bruce and Dick to wait. Dick wished that he'd hurry up and return. He desperately wanted to talk to Bruce and couldn't do it here in MacCauley's office.

Dick anxiously drummed his fingers as he waited. Becoming aware of the photos of the murdered children staring down at him, Dick suddenly felt the room closing in. An annoying trickle of perspiration began to wend its way slowly and inexorably down his

back.

Where the hell was MacCauley?

Dick jumped up and started pacing. At Bruce's steady, pointed glare, Dick sat back down again. In desperation, he showed the pictures of the four boys to Bruce.

"MacCauley's the OIC of the Bludhaven Child Murders case," Dick explained. "He told my class that he keeps the pictures of the murdered children in his office so that he can remind himself each day of why he's coming to work. We've even posted the pictures in the Cadet Lounge. Sort of to remind us why we're joining the force."

Bruce stood up and walked over to the wall to study each photo carefully.

"As you can see," Dick continued, not looking at the pictures, "the boys are all approximately the same age, have the same dark hair, fair complexion, and dark blue eyes. It looks like the perp's hunting for the same kid over and over. I've started putting out feelers on the street, see if I can scare anything up."

By this time, Bruce had gone completely still. Dick didn't notice at first, but soon he looked up at his mentor and foster father.

"Bruce? What is it?" he asked perplexed. "Bruce?"

Bruce removed the photo of the first murdered boy, Danny O'Brien, from the bulletin board, and stared at it. He looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Where the hell's MacCauley?" Bruce demanded icily.

"Bruce, what's the matter?" Dick asked worriedly.

"Yes, Mister Wayne," MacCauley said quietly. Both he and Winters were standing in the open doorway. "Tell us what the matter is."

Bruce glared intently at MacCauley, a rage growing in his burning eyes.

"How long have you known?" he asked accusingly.

"Not long," MacCauley admitted. "I just figured it out, in fact, but I couldn't be certain. Not until this very moment, in fact. That's why I left you two alone in my office."

MacCauley shrugged and gave Bruce a chagrined look, mixed with more than a little guilt. He walked behind his desk and sat down. Looking up at Bruce, MacCauley spread out his hands as if to say, "So sue me!"

Bruce tossed Danny O'Brien's photo on the desk in disgust. He moved as far from MacCauley as the small space in the office would allow, and leaned against the wall, waiting, his eyes blazing cold blue fire.

Dick had seen the Batman angry before, of course, but it was a rare occasion that Bruce Wayne allowed himself to show such an openly raw emotion in public.

"When I saw you in the classroom," MacCauley explained, "I decided it was the break I needed. I figured that if I left the two of you alone in here long enough, that just maybe you'd provide the final clue."

Dick looked at Bruce and MacCauley in consternation.

"The kid hasn't figured it out, yet, by the way," MacCauley continued. "At least, not consciously."

"Figured what out?" Dick asked angrily. "Bruce, what are you two talking about?"

Bruce sighed heavily, as if a great weight were suddenly on his shoulders.

"I'd like to talk to my son in private, Captain MacCauley," he requested.

"I'm sorry, Mister Wayne," MacCauley said, shaking his head regretfully, "but this is police business. I hope you understand." Bruce studied MacCauley a moment longer, then reluctantly nodded his head.

"Captain MacCauley, may I?" Bruce looked questioningly at MacCauley, asking if he could take down all of the photos. MacCauley nodded. Bruce removed each photo carefully, then placed them side by side on MacCauley's desk.

"Dick, come over here. Study them closely, son. Tell me. What do you see?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Tell me, Tommy," Mikey said excitedly pointing at the children playing in the park. "What do you see?"<p>

Tommy sighed. Lambs for the slaughter, he thought. Spying a dark head running happily after a larger group of children, Tommy closed his eyes in fear.

He wanted to tell Mikey that it was time they left Bludhaven. Time that they got on the road and started looking for greener pastures, but each time Tommy so much as mentioned leaving this god forsaken dump of a town, Mikey exploded into a wild frenzy.

Tommy had lived in fear of his older brother for more than half his life. Before that, he'd lived in mortal fear of their mother. Now he lived in fear for his life...

\* \* \*

><p>The Gunther brothers' childhood had been one of nightly beatings and daily humiliations. They'd lived with a psycho mother who took pleasure in bringing pain and anguish to the two boys who reminded her so much of her drunken no-good husband.<p>

"How many times must I tell you to pick up after yourselves?" Mommy's shrill screeching could be heard throughout the low-rent apartment complex. "You're no good. Neither one of you! You're just like your father! I'm putting you both in the closet!"

"No! Mommy! Please!" the boys pleaded. "We'll be good! Please!" Mikey stood protectively in front of Tommy, taking the brunt of their mother's punishment.

"Don't hurt my brother!" Mikey cried out defiantly. The electric cord came down on them harder and faster, with a fury unmatched in its ferocity.

"How DARE you talk back to me! I'm your MOTHER!" Mommy screamed. "I COOK!" (WHIP!) "I CLEAN!" (WHIP!) "I do EVERYTHING for you!" (WHIP!) "And what does it GET ME!" (WHIP!) "Two ungrateful PUPS who do nothing but wet their beds and talk back to me!"

Mommy stood, hair disheveled and wild-eyed, over her boys. Suddenly, she dropped the electric cord as if from nerveless fingers, and brought her hand up to her head. Tears spilling unchecked, Mommy fell on her knees and she hugged both Tommy and Mikey to her breast. She began rocking them back forth, crooning endearments.

"Mommy loves you...Mommy loves you both so much...Why are you so bad? You know I have to punish you when you're bad...I hate it when you make me punish you. Mommy loves you so much...Why do you always hurt the ones you love..."

Tommy, sobbing and frightened, hugged his Mommy's neck.

"I love you, too, Mommy," Tommy insisted. "I love you, too. I'm sorry I was bad. I'll try to be good. I promise."

Mommy had on her favorite perfume, the one she always wore on nights she was going to have one of their "uncles" over. The nights their father usually drank himself to oblivion. The nights she locked them up the closet.

Tommy felt himself losing self-control...he was terrified of the closet.

Mommy stopped rocking and looked down at the dark stain forming around Tommy's seat. Mommy sat back very still. Tommy and Mikey held their breaths. Mommy suddenly smiled softly, almost kindly.

"Aw-www-ww. Did widdle Tommy wet his widdle pants?" she asked, wagging her finger at him. Tommy shook his head fearfully. Mommy's smile turned ugly, terrifying. Snake fast, her hand whipped out across his mouth. Tommy fell backwards, tasting blood.

"Don't you hurt my brother!" Mikey yelled.

He launched himself at Mommy, fists flailing. Mommy's hand reached desperately towards the kitchen sink. Her fingers closed around a heavy pan, and she swung it up and around. Mikey ducked at the last instant, and Mommy was only able to give him a glancing blow, but it was enough to bring him to his knees.

"MIKEY!" Tommy screamed. He ran to his brother and hugged him protectively. "Mikey...Mikey," Tommy sobbed. "You killed him...you killed him!" Mommy stood holding the frying pan looking foolish.

"He shouldn't've tried to hit me," she said sullenly. "I'm your mother...I deserve respect."

Mikey began stirring, but before he could fully regain consciousness, Mommy had Tommy help her drag him to the storage closet. When Tommy realized that he was being locked in the dark, dank closet again, he began screaming in terror! In a fit of anger Mommy put her hand on his face and shoved him inside. Tommy fell backwards, screaming.

"NO-OOO-OO! Mommy, NO-OOO-OO!" Tommy scrambled to the door feeling his way in the dark, and banged in desperation. "Please, Mommy, I'll be good! I promise! Mommy!" Sobbing brokenheartedly Tommy heard the bolt being thrown in place as Mommy locked the door from the outside.

Tommy huddled, sobbing, in a corner of their prison, a rat-infested storage space below the stairs in the basement. The place smelled of urine and human excrement. When Mikey, the older of the two, finally woke up, he crouched next to Tommy and held him close.

Sometimes Mommy would make them stay there for days at a time without food or water. Tommy thought that it was because she was punishing them for being bad, but Mikey knew that Mommy just didn't love them enough to need to punish them. When Mommy started drinking with whichever "uncle" she was entertaining, she promptly forgot about her two sons.

"Mikey, I was good. Honest," Tommy whimpered, crying.

"Shhhhhh, Tommy," Mikey said. "I'll take care of you. I promise."

On the few occasions that their father wasn't in a drunken stupor, he'd sexually abuse one or the other of the boys with impunity. Sometimes in the presence of his wife, who'd either look on in drunken disinterest, or laugh at their screams of pain.

"DON'T SCREAM!!" Daddy would roar in a rage. "I'm trying to show you how much I love you, you ungrateful brats! No one loves you like Daddy! No one ever will!"

A closed fist would suddenly come hurling down as punishment for crying. If the screams continued, then the thrashing became even more virulent. There'd been many a time that the boys had awakened, naked, bleeding, and bruised from one of their "loving" sessions with their father.

Invariably, like wounded puppies, they'd help each other crawl to bed from wherever they'd been carelessly tossed, like garbage, once Daddy had finished showing them how much he loved them.

"Why do they hurt us, Mikey?" Tommy asked. "They say they love us. Why do they have to hurt us?" Mikey held his brother closer.

"Because, Tommy, you always hurt the ones you love," Mikey replied.

Tommy and Mikey's abuse at the hands of their parents ended suddenly when twelve-year-old Mikey took a butcher knife and in a murderous rage killed first their mother, then their father. Mommy and Daddy were both passed out on the living room couch after a twenty-hour drinking binge.

"Yeah, Mommy and Daddy," Mikey said, standing over their bodies. "I guess I just wanted to show you how much I love you!"

Mikey then set fire to the entire apartment complex. Five people died later of smoke inhalation. Child Welfare Services determined Mikey to be incorrigible and unadoptable and placed him in the Juvenile Detention Center.

Tommy was placed in a series of foster homes, but the abuse at his parents' hands severely affected his emotional development. He was therefore unable to adjust to any normal home environment, and at the age of fifteen, Tommy raped and sodomized his forty-year old foster mother.

The woman's perfume reminded him of his own much feared and beloved Mommy's favorite scent. When arrested, Tommy kept mumbling that no one would ever lock him up in a closet again.

Tommy was placed in the Juvenile Detention Center where he was reunited with his older brother, Mikey.

"Don't worry, Tommy," Mikey said, hugging his cowering brother. "I promised you that I'd take care of you, didn't I?"

That was when Tommy's nightmare really started.

\* \* \*

><p>"I see your latest pet," Tommy intoned distractedly, pointing at the dark head that was suddenly swallowed up in crowd of children. Tommy felt a severe headache coming on. The headaches were coming more often lately.<p>

"You betcha!" Mikey agreed. Tommy looked around nervously. The children were several meters inside the park's green. They were too far off the park's motor vehicle path in order to drive the van in without arousing suspicion.

Suddenly, a horse-mounted police officer rode up to the playing children. He dismounted and gave the children a friendly greeting. The children gathered excitedly around him pleading to pet his horse.

"Oh please! Let me pet him! Please?" Tommy could hear the children's voices all the way back to where they were parked. He glanced over at Mikey. His brother had gone suddenly still. Tommy saw that Mikey was flexing and unflexing a fist in a slow-burning anger. Tommy knew that Mikey was about to explode. Quickly, he put the van in gear, started the motor, and began pulling out.

\* \* \*

><p>"I've already told you," Dick said shrugging his shoulders. "It's the same kid, almost. The guy's obsessed with this kid, whoever he is, and keeps hunting him. I don't know, maybe the victims didn't perform the way the perp's fantasy kid is supposed to perform. Maybe they cried, instead of telling him how much they loved him."<p>

Dick paused, his eyes pain-filled as he pictured the horrors these children must have gone through at the hands of their killer.

"Whatever the reason, in addition to raping and sodomizing his victims, he ended up torturing them, before his rage was finally spent. Then he threw them out with the morning garbage."

"Cadet Grayson," MacCauley said quietly. "There's another picture that I haven't hung on the wall. The fifth victim."

"There's been a fifth victim?" Dick asked incredulously. He slammed both hands on MacCauley's desk in blazing anger. Leaning forward he demanded vehemently, "When? Why hasn't anything been said about it?"

"Dick," Bruce's curt voice cut through Dick's anger. "Look at the picture."

Dick turned surprised eyes at Bruce. The look on his guardian's face sent him warning bells. Dick felt the room growing unbearably hot.

"Look at the picture," Bruce repeated, quietly. His eyes signaled MacCauley.

MacCauley pulled the photo out of an old file, and not taking his eyes off Dick, carefully lay it on the desk. Dick forced himself to look down at the picture. He squinted trying to clear his blurring vision. He had to concentrate to focus on the face staring back at him.

Dick felt suddenly feeling cold inside. The others were beginning to move in slow motion. Dick felt the room beginning to spin. He heard a roaring his ears.

In a flash, the images of his four-way reflection in the Men's latrine came rushing back, and he saw his face morphing onto those of the victims. Because smiling up at him, from out of the past, was the last picture ever taken of him while at Haly Circus.

It was the same photo circulated by the police when he disappeared from the Juvenile Detention Center all those years ago, when he was later believed to have been kidnapped by Michael Gunther, a known pedophile suspected in a string of murders of young boys.

"Bruce, what is this?" Dick whispered in denial. He turned to MacCauley. "What are you trying to pull, Captain MacCauley?" The detective didn't say anything, just looked pointedly at the five photographs spread below.

Little Dicky Grayson was a twin to the four murdered boys.



Dicky Grayson had been all of nine years old when he'd disappeared, and no one, except for one man, held out any hope that the boy would be returned alive. That man eventually rescued little Dicky from the very jaws of death, and today was standing next to him offering his unwavering support.

"Bruce," Dick looked at his foster father pleading. "It can't be. You promised! You said they'd be in prison for the rest of their lives! You promised!"

Dick grabbed Bruce by lapels, staring at him accusingly for failing him once again. Then overwhelmed by this unexpected turn of events, Dick collapsed in the nearest chair. Winters quickly moved to stand next to him. She heard him saying something, but had to lean down to make out the words.

"Mikey and Tommy," Dick whispered in a frightened little boy voice. "They're back!"

**\*\*End of Part 3\*\***

#### 4. Chapters 6 & 7

##### **\*\*Chapter Six\*\***

"NO! NO! NO!" Mikey screamed enraged! "He's MINE! MINE!" Tommy was terrified. Mikey was slamming his fists on the van's dashboard, in time to his screams. Unable to control his growing frenzy, Mikey fumbled with his seatbelt and stood up. He stumbled to the back of the van, bumping into the gearbox in the process, almost causing Tommy to lose control of the vehicle.

As the van careened erratically around the doublewide highway, Tommy swerved to avoid oncoming traffic. Mikey meanwhile was roaring out his fury in the back, kicking supplies, the van's bulkheads, anything to assuage the tempest swirling in his mind.

Tommy had to get them back to their safe house before Mikey did something that would get them both arrested.

"I WANT HIM!" Mikey screamed, foam spewing out of his mouth. "He's MINE! Stop the van, Tommy! Stop the van now! I'm going back there, and I'm bringing him home, and I'm going to punish him for being bad!" Mikey rushed to the front, and started struggling with Tommy for control of the van.

"Do you hear me, you little ungrateful PUP? I'm coming for you! And when I get my hands on you, you're gonna wish that you were dead!"

"Mikey! MIKEY!" Tommy screamed in desperation, trying to wrest control from his incensed brother. "Let go of the steering wheel! You'll kill us both! Mikey! You're gonna kill us both!"

At this moment Tommy's heart almost stopped. Barreling towards them at 55 mph was a Mack truck pulling two trailers! Tommy turned to his brother, and punched him with as much force as he could muster with his closed fist. Mikey staggered backwards, giving Tommy the opening he needed.

At the last possible second, Tommy and the driver of the oncoming truck managed to swerve and avoid a head-on collision.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" Tommy began chanting. "Ohgod, Ohgod, ohgodohgod..."

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley's voice intoned the list of charges and convictions against the Gunther brothers.<p>

"Thomas and Michael Gunther, tried and convicted of kidnapping a minor child, one Richard John Grayson, with intent to commit rape, and intent to commit lewd acts with said minor child."

MacCauley paused for a reaction from the others. Dick ran his hand surreptitiously across his eyes, and looked away, anywhere except where Bruce was standing. Bruce stood leaning against the wall, his dark eyes boring a hole into Dick as if willing the younger man to look at him. Winters stood behind Dick, her hands on his shoulders, trying to offer comfort and support through her close presence.

MacCauley continued his litany.

"The State didn't have enough evidence to try the Gunthers for murder, although they were suspected in several child kidnappings/murders similar to the current ones. Therefore, the brothers were only tried on the two counts of kidnapping with intent, and they were sentenced to nonconcurring double life sentences with no chance of parole."

MacCauley looked up at Bruce.

"It says here, Mister Wayne, that you would not allow the lead witness for the prosecution, Richard Grayson, to testify?"

Bruce nodded.

"That's correct, Captain MacCauley, and I'd make the same decision today. Dick was only nine years old. He'd watched his parents fall to their deaths only a few weeks prior, and then was placed in the Gotham Juvenile Detention Center to wait for a foster family. While there, Dick was severely beaten and had his life threatened."

Bruce's eyes burned into MacCauley's.

"Can you blame me for wanting to protect him?"

Bruce glanced over at Dick who was determinedly looking away.

"Dick had already been through so much, MacCauley. So much had been taken from him. So much had been done to him. I couldn't bear to see him suffer any further. The DA at the time, Harvey Dent, was a personal friend. He said he could effectively prosecute the Gunthers without the boy's testimony."

Bruce looked sadly in Dick's direction, then setting his jaw grimly

he turned back to MacCauley.

"And he did! I was just grateful that we got Dick back alive!"

"Yes, alive," Dick whispered.

These were the first words he'd spoken in almost ten minutes. Bruce and MacCauley turned to him. His eyes bright with unshed tears, Dick turned an accusing stare at Bruce.

"Alive, yes," Dick said louder. He quickly wiped tears that just seemed to have started falling of their own accord.

"And what else, Bruce? What else?" Dick stood up suddenly. "Why didn't you want me to testify, Bruce? Were you afraid I'd remember what they did to me? Is that it?"

Bruce looked at Dick with genuine confusion. He shook his head.

"Dick, I don't have any idea what you're talking about?" Bruce made it into a question, rather than a statement.

"Don't you? Was I raped, Bruce?" The ragged question was torn out of Dick. Abruptly, Dick sat down again, his legs unable to support him.

"Was I raped?" he repeated softly.

Dick's question hung in the air like a seemingly malodorous presence. It was met with stunned looks from the others, but no more so than from Bruce. He crossed over quickly to Dick and knelt in front of him.

"Dick..." Bruce said in quiet desperation. "Son, listen to me. I don't know where you got this idea, but I swear...there was no physical evidence of any sexual abuse."

Dick turned away, refusing to look his adoptive father in the eyes. Bruce looked helplessly at Winters, shaking his head as if to say, "What do I do now?" Winters spoke quietly to Dick.

"Dick...Dick, can you tell us why you think that you were raped when you were kidnapped?" Dick violently shook his head, unable to articulate the visions that were haunting his dreams.

"No," he whispered in the same little boy voice he'd used earlier. Suddenly, his whole body became racked with deep, heartfelt sobs. "No!" he said louder.

"NO-OOO-OO!" Dick cried out in agony, his soul in pain. Needing his father, Dick turned to Bruce who immediately welcomed him protectively into his strong arms. Bruce held Dick, allowing him to expend his emotions before he spoke again.

"Dick, Doctor Leslie checked you out as soon as you came to us...remember?"

Dick nodded.

"I asked her to check for any signs of sexual assault. Dick, you had so many cuts and bruises on you, that Alfred and I were both terrified of what they'd obviously done to you and what they might've done."

Bruce stopped and took Dick's stricken face between his hands, forcing Dick to look at him.

"Dick, son, listen to me. Doctor Leslie found no physical signs of sexual abuse. Just to be sure she hadn't missed anything, she even talked to you...using questions specifically designed for children to describe sexual contact."

"But I felt him, Bruce!" Dick protested. "In my dreams. I saw Mikey." He choked unable to continue. "He...he...he had his hands all over me!" Dick suddenly wrapped his arms around himself, and began rocking.

"He was TOUCHING ME!" Dick cried out his voice ragged. "I could feel him...his hot breath on the back of my neck...And he kept yelling at me! DON'T SCREAM! DON'T SCREAM! Over and over again!"

Unable to continue, Dick clawed his way to Bruce and held him for dear life. He was nine years old again, and he'd just lost his parents. Bruce was the only grownup who showed any real sympathy, who offered any real hope. It was Bruce who took his hand and offered him a home and a place to belong and who became his new father.

Dick clung to Bruce now the same way he'd clung to Batman when the Dark Knight swooped in from the skylights, like a man-sized bat, and pulled him out of the Gunther brothers' house of horrors. He now clung to Bruce for the sake of his sanity.

\* \* \*

><p>"Mikey, I promise you, I'll find him for you!" Tommy called from the driver's seat. "But you gotta sit back there and be good. D'you hear me, bro? If you're good, I promise, I'll find Dicky for you!"<p>

Tommy chanced a backward glance toward the interior of the van. Mikey was curled in a fetal position in the corner. He was whimpering like a wounded puppy. Tommy felt his own tears begin to form.

"That stupid cop had no right!" Tommy said out loud. "He had no right to show up just at that moment! Mikey, I swear I'll make it up to you. Just like you've always taken care of me, I'll take care of you. Whatever it takes, bro. Whatever it takes."

"Tommy...I only want to show him how much I love him," Mikey said in a little boy voice. "Why won't he let me show him how much I love him?"

"Because he's an ungrateful pup, Mikey, just like you said," Tommy said soothingly. "Don't worry, bro. Once we find him, you can show him then. I'll help you show him. I won't let him hurt you anymore, Mikey. I promise."

Tommy looked back again and saw that his big brother had fallen asleep in exhaustion.

"I promise..."

\* \* \*

><p>"The Gunthers probably escaped from Blackgate shortly after the earthquake," MacCauley mused. "In the ensuing confusion, they probably walked right out without being challenged."<p>

Bruce looked apologetically at Dick. He'd failed to protect him...again!

It's not your fault, Bruce, Dick's eyes pleaded.

Winters observed the interplay between Bruce and Dick from the sidelines. There was a large amount of unspoken pain between them, but there was also genuine love. Whatever brought them together in the first place, in the ensuing years a true bond had obviously been forged. They might not be biological father and son, but their emotional ties were as strong as if they were.

"Mister Wayne, Dick," Winters said tentatively. They both looked up at her. "I may be of help, if Dick is willing." Bruce looked at her as one would an intruder.

"You mean hypnosis, Doctor?" he asked. Dick looked up startled at Winters. She nodded.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean," she replied unperturbed. "I know that it sounds like a frightening proposition, Dick, but it's not as bad as the movies make it, I promise." She smiled slightly.

"We psychologists get a bad rap in the media, I'm afraid. Practicing mind control over our unwitting patients."

Winters pulled a chair over and sat down next to Dick. She took his hand and gave him a frank, open look.

"Dick, I promise that it's nothing like that. Under hypnosis, a patient may or may not be able to recall incidents clearer than if he's awake and conscious. When you're under, you're relaxed, and most of your natural inhibitions and any daily distracters that would normally cause you to forget or block something out, are removed."

Winters saw immediately that neither Dick nor Bruce liked the sound of that.

"Don't worry. Under hypnosis there are still certain programmed autoresponses that cannot be removed. That's why people say that a subject under hypnosis can't be made to kill. Most of us are programmed from infancy that killing is wrong; aversion to killing becomes so strongly ingrained in most of us, that a subject under hypnosis will refuse to kill."

Winters grinned suddenly.

"Otherwise, can you imagine the armies of trained zombies we psychologists could have out there right now, ready to do our bidding at a moment's notice if we gave them just the right post-hypnotic

command?"

She laughed at the absurdity of such an occurrence, looking first at one then the other. When Winters realized that neither one was laughing, she promptly swallowed her chuckles and stopped, embarrassed.

Of course, Winters had never run afoul of such villains as Brother Blood or Hugo Strange or the Mad Hatter; however, both Dick and Bruce had, and neither one ever wished to repeat the experience of losing his identity at the hands of another.

"Hmm-mmm-mm. I can see that this is going to be harder than I thought," she said.

"No, you're right, Lauren," Dick said quietly. "Bruce, she's right. I'll always wonder what happened to me otherwise."

"Dick, do you realize what you'll be submitting yourself to? You'll be wide open, unprotected," Bruce said. Two pairs of piercing blue eyes bored into each other, neither side willing to back down.

Winters looked on wonderingly. If it weren't for the fact that she knew Bruce and Dick weren't related biologically, she would've taken them for father and son. They not only act like father and son, Winters realized, they look like father and son.

"I won't be there for you," Bruce insisted.

"That's not exactly true, Mister Wayne," Winters interrupted. "It isn't the usual procedure, but I can have a close family member in the room at the time a patient goes under. Rather than it being just my voice the subject listens to, the family member can make his supportive presence known. It usually works best with children, or with adults undergoing age regression. It's always good to have a parent there to provide added comfort."

"Bruce? If you say no, I'll understand," Dick said eyes downcast. Bruce studied Dick a moment longer, noting the dark circles under his eyes, the hunched-in self-defeated look that was so unlike the confident young man he knew so well.

"When do we start, Doctor?" Bruce asked.

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\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter Seven<strong>

"Absolutely not! I will not allow my son's session with a psychologist to be witnessed by anyone except myself!" Bruce's booming voice could be heard three corridors down. He and MacCauley were alone in MacCauley's office.

Dick had to report to the indoor pistol range for qualification with his .38 Police Special. While Winters had an afternoon session at a free clinic where she volunteered. They'd agreed to meet the next day in Winters' private office at Bludhaven General.

Once alone with Bruce, MacCauley revealed his plans to be present during Dick's session with Winters the next day. Bruce promptly exploded. Allowing Dick to submit to hypnosis was risky enough with Dr. Winters, a practicing psychologist, bound by her oath of doctor/patient privilege; however, when that psychologist was also a sworn police officer, then anything she deemed pertinent to the current case could be considered evidence.

To have MacCauley, the officer in charge of the investigation, also present was untenable.

"You have little choice, Mister Wayne," MacCauley said coolly. "Your son is a police officer, sworn to serve and protect, and Doctor Winters is a police psychologist. This is not a private therapy session. I'm investigating a child serial killer, and any knowledge Cadet Grayson may have relevant to this case is considered police business."

"Dick is my son, and I intend to do everything in my power to protect him," Bruce said quietly. "I can make one phone call, MacCauley, and bring so much fire on you, you'll need a flak jacket to survive the fallout!"

"Wayne, I have a son, too," MacCauley said. "Davey turned ten just two weeks ago. Don't you think that I want to protect him? Don't you think that each day when I come into work I don't pray that I'll catch these monsters before they can hurt another child just like him?"

MacCauley stood toe to toe with Bruce.

"I love my son, too, Wayne!" he declared. "But I also know that I can't protect him from all of life's bumps and scrapes. I just pray to God that I've been able to teach him enough about the dangers out there that he'll be able to avoid the worst. And each night, before I go to bed, I kiss my boy, thankful that he's the greatest kid in the world and that we've made it through another day!"

MacCauley paused and studied Bruce for a few seconds.

"We're a lot alike, you know that? We're both driven by our jobs, obsessed with being the best at what we do. You...CEO of the largest corporation on the East Coast. Me...head of the Violent Crimes Division in one of the most crime-ridden cities in the Mid-Atlantic states."

MacCauley walked towards his small window, which overlooked the Police Academy's parade grounds.

"But in the end, we're both just a couple of Dads worried about our boys and trying to protect them from life's worst dilemmas."

There was silence between the two men for several seconds. Finally, Bruce broke it, his tentative voice telling MacCauley more than the words themselves.

"When I saw Dick's parents plunge to their death, I knew that I wouldn't rest until their killer was brought to justice. I dogged the GCPD on a daily basis, demanding information, making sure that the

case was not being shoved aside and forgotten. Unfortunately, in my zeal to see justice done, I, along with just about every other adult involved, forgot about the boy."

Bruce walked over to the desk and picked up Dick's photo.

"When he first disappeared, almost no one in authority knew about it. He'd been placed in the Juvenile Detention Center...supposedly to wait for a suitable foster home...and was promptly forgotten. To make a long story short, he was helped by a bunch of kids to escape. Within a day or so, he vanished without a trace."

Bruce snapped his fingers.

"Just like that!" He turned angry, outraged eyes at MacCauley. "Can you believe that? A nine-year-old boy disappears, like he's never even existed, and no one's the wiser!"

Bruce grimaced bitterly.

"I may be the CEO of the largest corporation in the East Coast, MacCauley, but it means little when you're trying to cut through a mountain of red-tape and a deliberate institutional cover-up designed to hide the disappearance of one small boy. When it was finally over, when I had Dick back, tucked and safely asleep in his bed, there were a lot of heads that rolled. I made sure of it!"

Recalling the days of raw numbing fear that he and Alfred lived through during that whole period, Bruce absentmindedly traced the outline of Dick's sunny smile with his index finger.

"I tried playing by the rules, MacCauley. I tried talking to the people in Child Welfare Services. All I wanted was to make sure that Dick got the best foster home possible. I wasn't even looking to adopt him at the time. I was only concerned for a lonely little boy who had no one left in the world, who in a split second saw his whole life seemingly come to an end."

Bruce looked up, his remembered feeling of near defeat obvious on his face.

"They wouldn't even return my phone calls! Frustrated with all of the doors that were being slammed in my face, I finally went to an...unorthodox source," he said.

"The Batman?" MacCauley asked. At Bruce's raised eyebrow, MacCauley snorted. "Even here in Bludhaven we've heard of Gotham City's protector." His mouth quirked up sardonically.

"In fact, I hear that Bludhaven has its own protector now. Hardly more than a kid from all the reports I've been able to garner, but he seems to be in tight with the Batman. Calls himself Nightwing. You wouldn't know about him, would you, Mister Wayne?"

Bruce looked up from Dick's photo.

"What? Nightwing?" he asked vaguely. "No, I don't know of any vigilante by that name. Although, I've heard that Batman has been known to recruit assistants in the past."



"So, did the Batman find young Grayson?" MacCauley asked, bringing the conversation back to the original topic. Bruce's eyes bored intently into MacCauley's.

"Yes, MacCauley, he did. When all of the GCPD's assets failed, when my own army of lawyers and private investigators failed, one lone man succeeded. Do I believe the Batman is necessary, Captain MacCauley? What do you think?"

Bruce paused.

"Maybe you should make an effort to meet this young vigilante, Nightwing. You never know, MacCauley. He may be the lone man who succeeds when everyone else's hands have been tied with red tape."

\* \* \*

><p>"Mii-keeey!" called Tommy. "Mikey? You awake, bro?" Tommy stood in the middle of their converted family room in the abandoned apartment complex they'd turned into a home. The room had an impressive array of weightlifting and other exercise equipment. Both Mikey and Tommy were health fanatics and couldn't go for more than a single day without working out.<p>

In addition, there was a wide-screen, 36-inch television set, with a game converter box attached. They had a brightly colored box full of toys that would appeal to young boys: Transformers, the latest of the Star Wars action toys, Hot Wheels, high-powered water rifles, and several more games and toys.

Experience taught the Gunther brothers that their pets would remain cooperative longer if provided with the means to amuse themselves.

Tommy was holding a relatively small, squirming bundle tossed carelessly over his shoulder. Every now and then it would slip, and he'd have to readjust his purchase on it.

"Now where could that guy have gone off to?" Tommy asked the empty room.

"Tommy? Is that you, bro?" Tommy whipped around, his heart racing.

Mikey stood at the door in his shorts. He was rubbing his eyes blearily. His coarse, light brown hair stood straight out. Both brothers were forced to grow their hair out to hide the identifying matching tattoos of attacking cobras that started at the base of their necks and ended on the crown of their heads.

Mikey's pectorals stood out prominently; he'd been middle weightlifting champ at Blackgate. That earned him a forced respect from the other prisoners who normally held child molesters in contempt. Tommy lived under Mikey's protective umbrella during their stay there.

Now it was Tommy's turn to take care of Mikey. Mikey was growing increasingly confused about his surroundings. It was scaring Tommy to death. He'd always depended on his older brother's strength and protection. Tommy didn't know what he'd do if he ever lost Mikey. He

had to do everything in his power to help his brother.

That's why he'd brought him a present.

"Yeah, Mikey, it's me," Tommy said smiling. "Guess what, bro? I brought you a surprise." Tommy held out the bundle for his brother's inspection.

"A surprise? For me?" Mikey asked, obviously pleased at his brother's thoughtfulness. "What's the occasion? My birthday's still months away, bro!"

The tightly wrapped package began to move. Mikey heard what sounded like mewling sounds coming from within. That was Mikey's first indication that whatever was wrapped in the bundle was alive.

He smiled delightedly.

Mikey was thrilled! It wasn't even Christmas or his birthday. No one had ever given him a present just because! Smiling broadly, Mikey eagerly uncovered one end of the bundle. His excitement escalated an additional ten points.

Struggling futilely in Tommy's arms was a beautiful boy, about five or six years old. He had bright blue eyes, which were currently wide as saucers from fright, dark hair the color of the night, a fair complexion with a light smattering of freckles across the tiny bridge of his nose.

After a few moments, Mikey recognized the boy as the one they'd followed from the bus stop all those days ago. The one who'd proudly shown his Mommy his lost tooth.

"Mikey, if your smile gets any wider," Tommy teased, "your face is gonna break!"

Mikey looked gratefully at his brother. Not quite believing that the boy was actually there, he traced his fingers tenderly along the boy's soft cheek and dark hair. Mikey could see twin trails on either cheek made by tears and felt the still wet spots.

"Look at what the Tooth Fairy brought me, eh, Tommy?" Mikey whispered lovingly. The boy's eyes widened further, and he began struggling all the harder in Tommy's arms. He was making tiny, high-pitched mewling sounds. But no one would be able to hear him, Mikey thought, because Tommy had considerately gagged the boy with duct tape to keep him from crying out.

"Dicky," Mikey whispered, overcome with emotion, his own eyes bright with unshed tears. "Tommy, you brought him home to me. Thank you, bro. You're the best brother ever!"

Tommy smiled happily, glad that he'd cheered his older brother.

Mikey lovingly took the bundle from Tommy.

"Dicky, you've been naughty," he crooned. "But you're home now, and Mikey just can't stay mad at you for long. Mikey forgives you because he loves you sooo-ooo much. And soon, very soon, he's going to show

you just how much he loves you."

Mikey stopped and turned slowly towards Tommy, his confused eyes happy but slightly unfocused.

"Tommy, do you want to show Dicky how much you love him, too?"

Tommy shook his head no.

"Naw, Mikey. He's all yours...I got him just for you." Mikey smiled again. He inhaled deeply, filling himself with the unconditional love of his little brother. One day he'd show Tommy just how much he loved him, too...

\* \* \*

><p>"You said you had information?"<p>

Sable whirled at the menacing tone coming from the shadows. She visibly straightened herself, then slinked in the direction of the voice.

"Wingster, baby," she said huskily. "We've got to stop meeting like this."

"Nightwing couldn't make it. He sent me, instead." The Dark Knight emerged from the gloom of the shadows into the weak light afforded by the quarter moon.

"Eeeeeep!" Sable squeaked in real fright. The color rushed from underneath her heavily made-up face. Sable swallowed several times, before she was finally able to find her voice. Recovering her composure, she moved in closer to the menacing newcomer.

"Well, well, well, well, well!" Sable said admiringly. "Mmmm-mmm-mm. Baby, leave it to the Wingster to send the first stringer in his place...When you care enough to send the very best!"

She laughed throatily.

"My, my, my! If it isn't the Dark Knight himself! Wait'll I tell the girls over at Kylie's stable. Those bitches will be so green with envy, the Docs will have to check 'em over for VD!"

Batman cleared his throat.

"Yes, well, Ms. Sable, is it? Nightwing said you had information--?"

"All in good time, baby," Sable whispered in a throaty voice, running her hands admiringly up Batman's chest. "All in good time." She leaned closely and inhaled the slightest trace of soap.

"Mmmm-mm-m. Clean and straight!" she said dreamily. "How lucky can one girl get?"

Batman could feel her hot breath along his cheek. The next thing he felt was her hot, wet tongue running along his exposed jawline!

That did it! Batman didn't like to hit women, but this one was a bit

too bold and brassy for his taste. Even the Catwoman wouldn't dare to do such a thing.

Batman grabbed Sable by her pink boa and spun her around, holding her at an arm's length.

"Okay, lady, one last time...do you or do you not have information for Nightwing?" he asked threateningly. Sable pouted disappointedly.

"Oh, all right," she said rolling her eyes disgustedly. "You spandex heroes are all alike. All work and no play."

Batman released her, shoving her away slightly, as if afraid she might throw herself at him again. Sable crossed her arms and gave Batman a chagrined look. She shook her head in disbelief.

"You must be that boy's father," she said after awhile. "You act just like him, only more so!"

Abruptly, Sable pulled off her wig and rummaged underneath the sweatband until she found what she was looking for. Without his wig, it was obvious to even the most myopic that Sable was in fact a man. Nonplussed, Batman blinked from behind his cowl and stood mouth gaping.

That...person...had run his tongue along his cheek!

Dick, when I get my hands on you--! Batman fumed silently.

When Nightwing informed Batman about Sable, a hooker who might have some information for him tonight, he'd laughed to himself as if at a private joke. Batman now knew that he had been the butt of his protege's little gag.

Locating what he needed, Damon turned his back to Batman and carefully replaced his wig, transforming himself back into Sable. Then, straightening her boa and running nervous fingers through her wig, Sable turned once more to face the Dark Knight. She walked tentatively over to Batman and handed him a slip of paper.

"I overheard a couple of Johns talking about these two bad dudes who've been ripping off electronics stores for games 'n such. Same dudes heisted a truck from Toys R Us. I didn't catch the names of the guys doing the heists, but these are the names of the Johns that were talking. Couple of high up muckity-ups...part of Blockbuster's Organization."

Sable paused, her eyes blazing in anger.

"All they care about is that someone's ripping off Blockbuster, man. They don't give a rat's ass if these may be the same dudes involved in the child killings."

Sable shook her head. The men's callousness affected even her hardened shell.

"Batman, give my regards to the Wingster. Tell 'im any time, any place, any way he wants it. I'm ready, willing, and able." She smiled wickedly. "And that, of course, goes double for you!"

With that Sable swung around and ambled back to her street corner, hawking her wares to all who passed within close proximity.

"Okay, Nightwing, you had your little joke at the old man's expense; however, two can play at this game," Batman said. His mouth quirked at having been caught unawares by both Nightwing and Sable.

"Young man, you are in so much trouble!"

**\*\*End of Part 4\*\***

## 5. Chapters 8 & 9

### **\*\*Chapter Eight\*\***

The call came just a few minutes before they were scheduled to go off shift. Sgt. Jennings sighed. It looked like he'd be getting home late again. He glanced over at his partner, Officer Kelp, who was writing down the specifics in his neat shorthand.

Kelp picked up the mike and acknowledged the information.

"This is Lincoln Oscar Five, ETA four minutes. Out." Kelp flipped on the emergency lights and sirens. Jennings and Kelp looked resignedly at each other. Another child reported missing. At the moment, they didn't know if this was another victim in the growing list of child murders.

Either way, it looked like a late shift for them...

\* \* \*

><p>"What do you have?" MacCauley asked Jennings. He was glad Jennings and Kelp caught the call. They were both experienced patrolmen and knew better than to walk all over the crime scene.<p>

"William Theodore Grady, called Billy by his family, six years old, disappeared from his bedroom some time last night. Mrs. Deana Grady, the mother, says that she put her son to bed at approximately eight p.m. She waited up for her husband, Theodore Grady, who was working late and didn't come home until ten p.m."

Jennings paused, checking his notes closely, and then continued.

"Mister Grady says that after his wife went to bed, he stayed up about another half-hour having a nightcap. At approximately eleven-thirty p.m., Grady walked around the apartment and checked all of the windows and doors, something his wife says he does every night, looked in on his son, and went to bed."

Jennings shrugged his shoulders and shook his head tiredly.

"This morning when the Gradys woke up, they discovered their son missing. Billy's bedroom window shows signs of forced entry, and there's heavy footprint activity right outside. The magnesium security lights immediately outside the Gradys' apartment building

were out of order. I had Kelp check 'em...looks like they've been deliberately broken...shot out. There were more footprints around the light pole, and these--"

Jennings held up a plastic baggy containing two spent .22 shells.

"How about the neighbors? Anybody see or hear anything?" MacCauley asked, not really expecting anything, but hopeful nevertheless.

"Yeah, at about four, four-fifteen a.m., one of the neighbors, a woman, Brianna Moore, says she was awakened by what sounded like glass breaking. She says she didn't really think much of it at the time, but now she realizes that her bedroom was really dark."

At MacCauley's questioning look, Jennings explained.

"She says that the outside security light usually shines right into her bedroom, making it hard to fall asleep at nights sometimes. She usually has her blinds pulled as tightly as possible, but last night, because it was such a cool night, she decided to turn off the apartment's central air, and instead, slept with her bedroom windows open and the blinds slightly drawn in order to let in the cool breeze. The sound that woke her could've been the security light being broken by the perp."

MacCauley nodded in agreement.

"That would put the snatch at about four, four-fifteen. Good job, Jennings. Look, why don't you and Kelp go home and get some sleep? Thanks for sticking around until I had a chance to talk to you."

"No need to thank me, Captain MacCauley, sir. That's why the City of Bludhaven pays me and my partner such a generous overtime salary...Just so's we can stand around and watch the sun rise while awaiting your esteemed arrival and the privilege of observing your legendary investigative skills."

MacCauley laughed.

"Get outta here, Jennings, before I forget that you gave me my first break when I was a rookie."

"Don't remind me!" Jennings said, slapping his forehead with the palm of his hand. "If I'd'a told you to go left instead of right, I'd be the big shot head of Violent Crimes today and not some lowly patrol officer!"

"Don't give me that, Jennings," MacCauley said. "They'll have to pry you out of your squad car when it's time for you to retire. All you've ever wanted is the streets. You've turned down a gold shield more times than the pansies down at Personnel can count. And I know I've personally asked you several times to join my little division."

"Yeah, but would you respect me in the morning?" Jennings asked facetiously. At this moment, Kelp came walking up, leading a sullen looking teenager. "Besides, if I came to work for you, Mac, who'd watch out for Kelp? He'd be totally lost without me."

"Huh?" Kelp asked. Jennings gave MacCauley a "See what I mean?" look. MacCauley grinned.

"What do you have, Kelp?" MacCauley asked.

"Tony Davila, sixteen years old, member of the Arlington Heights' neighborhood street gang known as 'Los Muchachos'." Kelp grabbed Davila roughly by the collar and pushed him forward. "Tell the gentlemen where you were at around four, four-fifteen this morning, Tony."

"Hey, I don't gotta tell you nothing, man!" Davila said belligerently. "I know my rights, man! I don't say nothing without a lawyer!"

"You haven't been charged with anything, yet, punk!" Kelp said, getting in the boy's face. "I don't gotta get you nothing, except a slap across your mouth! We have a missing six-year-old boy, you hear me? You know what they do to child molesters in prison, punk? Keep up that attitude, and we'll have you on child kidnapping charges as an accessory after the fact!"

"Hey, man! I ain't no pervert, man! What'chu sayin' that for, man? I din't take no kid! Man, I had nuthin' t'do wit' no kidnapping!"

"Hey, kid, no one's saying you did," Jennings interjected soothingly. He stepped forward and placed his arm around Davila. "Hey, I'm sorry about my partner, Tony. He gets a little high strung sometimes. Look, I know you ain't no pervert, kid. Once you've been on the force as long as I have, you get a sort of sixth sense for these things. But my partner, well, he's still new. He gets excited. Look, why don't you just tell us what you saw, and we'll call it even, okay?"

Davila nodded, looking aggrieved, as Jennings spoke, interjecting, "Man, he ain't got no right to call me no pervert!" over and over.

"Okay," Davila agreed, "but only 'cause I don't like no one to heist no little kid, see?"

"Of course, Tony. Absolutely," Jennings said, nodding sagely. MacCauley and Kelp who'd observed the whole exchange between Jennings and Davila turned and hid their smirks.

"So what were you doing outside of your turf last night, Tony?" Jennings asked.

"I overheard these two punks from a rival gang dissing our neighborhood, so me and a couple of my home boys followed them here to this apartment complex. We was gonna do a drive-by, man, but then we found out that one of the dude's was visiting his grandmother." Davila shook his head emphatically.

"Man, you don't shoot a gangbanger's grandmother's house. Even if they dissed us first. So, me and my homeys, we decided to wait and jump them when they left."

Jennings and Kelp exchanged sardonic glances at the gang member's

idea of chivalry.

"Can you tell us what you saw around four, four-thirty this morning?" Jennings asked.

"It was weird, man," Davila said. "We're parked, ready to shoot the rival gangbangers when they come out of the grandmother's house, when this dark van pulls into the neighborhood. It has no headlights on. Even the motor is stopped. It's just...how do you say it? Gliding, man."

Kelp interrupted.

"There's a slight, twenty-percent downgrade on the road here," Kelp explained. At the others' nods, Davila continued.

"Anyway, the van glides to a stop, and a few minutes later, this dude gets out. Big, mean-looking guy. Looks like he works out a lot. I'm watching this dude, wondering what he's up to, when he pulls out a piece and shoots out the streetlights. I'm thinking, what a punk, man! Don't he have nothing better to do than shoot out streetlights? But, you know, what's funny? I didn't hear no shot. He just like pointed, man, and the lights went out." Davila shrugged.

Jennings looked at MacCauley. "Probably use a silencer," he said. MacCauley nodded.

"Anyway, the dude disappears in the dark. A few minutes pass by, then I see him come back, carrying a bundle of some kind...He tosses it in the back of the van, climbs in and takes off. His lights were still off, man, and I'm thinking, man, he's gonna cause an accident! I figured he must've ripped off one of the apartments. That's all I saw, man!"

Jennings nodded his thanks.

"Captain MacCauley?" Jennings called, deliberately emphasizing MacCauley's title and putting as much deference in his tone as possible. "Excuse me, sir, but do you have any further questions for this young man?"

"No, Sergeant Jennings," MacCauley replied. "I believe that Tony here has been most helpful and cooperative. What do you think, Officer Kelp? Don't you agree that Tony has been exceptionally helpful?"

Kelp nodded reluctantly in agreement.

"Yeah, Davila, I guess you told us everything you know. Look, man, I'm sorry about the rough treatment, but, well, you gotta understand. This case has me on edge, man. I mean any creep who'd do in a little kid. It's just got me a little crazy, know what I mean?"

Davila nodded his understanding.

"I know, man. Look, I'll get my home boys to keep an eye and ear out, okay?" He shook his head. "Hurting little kids...It just ain't right, man! It ain't right!" He walked away, still muttering to himself.



The three veteran police officers exchanged disbelieving glances. Their duties finished, Jennings and Kelp headed back to their squad car. It was almost ten a.m. They'd already worked almost four hours overtime. Both men were exhausted, but if MacCauley had asked them to remain, they would've done so willingly.

As it was, both Jennings and Kelp wanted to get home to hug their kids.

\* \* \*

><p>"This is the part I hate," MacCauley said to himself.<p>

Ted and Deana Grady were huddled together on the living room couch. They were a young couple, mid to late twenties. Billy was their only child. Deana Grady sat clutching an eight by ten portrait of Billy to her chest. Ted Grady was holding his wife tightly, his eyes shut against the world.

She was dressed in jeans and sweater; he was wearing grey coveralls with his first name, "Ted," sewn on the right front and "BludAuto Service Station" in bold letters across the back.

"Who could do such a thing, Captain MacCauley?" Deana asked. "Who could take a little boy away from his home and his..." She began weeping. "...Take him from his Mommy?" She turned to her husband and collapsed in brokenhearted sobs.

"Captain MacCauley," Grady looked up beseechingly. "Please, bring our little boy home...Billy's only six! He lost his first baby tooth only two days ago. Billy's never spent a night away from home before...never been away from his Mommy and Daddy...!" Grady finally broke down, too. "...Oh, God! Oh, God! Please, bring our little boy home safely..."

MacCauley and the other officers on the scene could only look on helplessly.

\* \* \*

><p>"So, what did you think about Sable?" Dick asked innocently. He and Bruce were on their way to Dr. Winters' office in Bruce's rented Jaguar. Top down, hair blowing in the wind, the latest Aerosmith CD blasting, and matching aviator glasses earned them both more than their fair share of waves and second looks from passing female motorists. Riding on the passenger side, Dick stole a surreptitious glance over at Bruce. Except for the tightening grip on the steering wheel, Bruce gave nothing away.<p>

Uh-oh, thought Dick. I'm in so much trouble. Time to change the subject--!

"I thought she was exceptionally lovely," Bruce replied. "I told her that whatever arrangements you two had was all right with me. I mean, you are legally an adult, after all; but I still can't help worrying about you, son. I hope that you're responsible enough to always use protection."

"Hey, waitaminute, Bruce!" Dick protested. "I never--!"

"Of course, I did think that lately, you and Barbara were becoming a little closer, but I can see how a young kid like you, away from home and all, could be attracted to such a--"

"Who me--?" Dick blustered. "Attracted to that--?" Dick's voice squeaked in protest. "Bruce, come on! You've gotta give me some credit. I admit, I'm a little lonely here in Bludhaven, but I'd never--!"

Dick heard a strange noise coming from the driver's side. He glanced over in shock! Was that laughter rumbling from Bruce Wayne's throat?

"Gotcha!" Bruce said. Dick sat still for a second, then recovering his composure, he began to hotly deny that Bruce had him fooled.

"Oh, you did not! I knew all along that you were just kidding!" Dick said.

"Played you like a violin," Bruce said unperturbed.

"Did not!"

"Reeled you in--!" Bruce replied.

--"Oh, listen to you...I was just going along is all--"

--"hook, line, and sinker!"

"I'm gonna tell Alfred..."

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter Nine<strong>

Bruce impatiently checked his watch again. Dick noted privately that it was the fifth time in as many minutes. The levity that they'd shared on the way over was long past. Dick felt his nerves on edge, and the waiting wasn't helping.

"Why can't we get started?" Dick muttered.

"Because Captain MacCauley has ascertained that anything you say could prove useful in his investigation," Bruce said coldly. "Therefore, we wait."

Winters stuck her head out of her office. She gave them a bright, cheerful smile.

"Hi, Dick...Mister Wayne. I'm sorry about the delay, but Captain MacCauley was called away on an emergency at the last moment." She paused sadly. "Another missing child, I'm afraid. But he's on his way now, and he's requested that we start without him. So...won't you step into my parlor...?"

Dick cringed at the imagery. He and Bruce exchanged glances, then nodding to each other, they stood and followed Winters into her

office. After sitting down, Dick looked around the room, taking in the many diplomas and citations on the wall behind her desk. A bookcase lined with medical texts covered most of another wall, with an entire bookshelf taken up by photos and other mementos.

"Is it too late to call this thing off?" Dick asked no one in particular.

"Any time you want to back out, just say so, Dick," Winters assured him. "This is entirely a no-pressure situation. We want to find out why you're having nightmares, and if they may or may not shed any light on these child abductions and killings. But this is strictly voluntary. So, what do you say? Yes or no?"

Dick glanced quickly over at Bruce again. Bruce met his gaze steadily, offering his support with whatever decision he made. Dick felt a rush of warmth flood his entire being. How did I ever become estranged from this man, Dick wondered? He's always been there for me, even when I thought he wasn't.

Winters observed their body language and was amazed, yet again, at how much they were obviously saying to each other without speaking. She'd seen this type of nonverbal communication before, but only in the closest of families; furthermore, the degree to which these two men seemed to share this almost telepathic mind link was usually present only in siblings who'd grown up together.

Once more, Winters wondered at the magnitude of the forces that could have brought the two men together and forged such a tightly knit, seamless bond between them. And they're going to need it to get through this, Winters thought. She looked at Dick again, almost regretfully. He seemed like such a fine, likeable young man. She hated what she was about to put him through.

\* \* \*

><p>Dick lay stiffly on Winters' couch. He felt jumpy, his heart rate heightened, and respiratory rate increased. He suddenly felt hot, the air in the room muggy. He could feel a trickle of sweat as it made its way down his forehead.<p>

From everything he knew about hypnosis, Dick didn't think he was in a very receptive state at the moment. Maybe he should just ask Winters to postpone the session. Dick was about to make the suggestion, when he caught sight of Bruce watching him through steepled fingers. Bruce rarely allowed himself to telegraph his emotions, but even Dick could tell that Bruce was worried about him. Dick swallowed a couple of times, smiled, and then gave Bruce a thumbs up.

Bruce's mouth quirked up in his usual half-grin. For Bruce that was almost the equivalent of removing his clothes in public and dancing on tables. Dick's smile broadened at the image. He suddenly felt much better. Bruce was here. That's all that mattered...

\* \* \*

><p>"Listen to my voice, Dick," the quiet, soothing voice said. "Who am I, Dick? Do you know me?"<p>

"Yes..." Dick whispered.

"Who am I?" the voice persisted.

"Doctor Winters..."

"Do you trust me, Dick?"

Dick paused, unsure. The voice wasn't a member of the family. She hadn't been initiated into the club. He felt confused.

Dick shook his head, no.

"I don't know..." he said helplessly. Suddenly another voice broke in, someone he knew, someone he trusted with his life, someone he'd die for.

"Dick, do you know who I am?" the deep, resonant voice asked. Dick smiled, his trust quickly melting his defenses.

"Yes...you're Bruce..." He brought his hand up. Suddenly, he felt a strong, firm grip in his.

"Do you trust me, Son?"

Dick held the warm hand tighter. His face softened into a little boy's open smile.

"Yes, 'cause you're my Dad, and you love me..." Dick felt another hand suddenly press his shoulder. It stayed there for a few moments, and then gently released.

"Yes, Son, I love you..."

Dick suddenly felt warm and safe all over. He'd do anything for Bruce. Ask me anything, Bruce, he thought giddily. We'll go flying together across the night sky. We'll dive into a hail of bullets. We'll--

"I want you to trust Doctor Winters, Dick. I want you to accept her, like you do me, and Alfred, and Barbara, and Tim. Do you understand, Dick?"

Dick nodded happily. Oh, fun! Come on, Doc, me 'n you 'n Timmy 'n Babs 'n Bruce...all of us together, we'll answer the Signal and go flying across the starlit sky--

"Dick, this is Doctor Winters. Can you hear me?"

Dick nodded, eager for the command to go soaring with his family.

"Dick, I'm going to ask you to count backwards from thirty. Will you do that for me, Dick?"

Dick nodded, disappointed. Where was the fun in that, he wondered? He shrugged his shoulders and began counting.

"Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight..."

"Dick, listen to me," Doctor Winters said softly as he counted. "When

you reach sixteen, I want to stop counting and remember your sixteenth birthday. Do you understand, Dick?"

Dick nodded. Stop interrupting me, he thought annoyed. You almost made me lose count...

"...Sixteen!" Dick stopped. Suddenly, his face took on the "Golly, gee-whiz," expression that only a sixteen-year-old boy can muster.

\* \* \*

><p>"The Batmobile? Honest? You're letting me drive her, Batman?" Robin's face was a mixture of delight and awe. He looked up just in time as Batman casually tossed him the keys.<p>

"She's all yours, chum! Just remember that Gotham City has a speed limit!"

\* \* \*

><p>Dick held his hands straight out in front of him, as if gripping a steering wheel. He was making funny "vroom-vroom" noises. Occasionally, he'd imitate the sound of tires squealing.<p>

"Dick, can you tell me what you're doing?" the soothing voice asked.

Smiling happily, Dick nodded, and continued to concentrate on his driving.

"I'm driving," he said, as if stating the obvious.

"Do you enjoy driving, Dick?"

"Are you kidding? I'm driving the coolest set of wheels in all of Gotham City...heck, in the whole world! What do you think?"

"I can see that," the voice said, ironically. "Dick, you've arrived at your destination. But before you exit your vehicle, I want you to resume counting backwards. Will you do that for me?"

Dick nodded, his disappointment obvious at having to give up "the coolest set of wheels in Gotham City."

"Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen..." he recited dutifully.

"Dick, when you reach eleven, I want you to stop and remember the happiest day you ever had while you were eleven."

"...Twelve, eleven!" Dick stopped, and suddenly his entire disposition transformed itself magically into the sunny, bright, fun-loving child that Bruce remembered running through the cold, empty rooms of Wayne Manor. The same little boy who somehow changed that dark and forbidding mausoleum into a happy home full of light and laughter.

\* \* \*

><p>"Yippee!" Dick cried, as he vaulted down the long, narrow upstairs hallway.<p>

"Master Dick!" Alfred called, shocked. "Young man, you know the rules. Absolutely no gymnastics or tumbling in the main house! That is allowed only downstairs!"

"Aw, don't get your feather duster in a tizzy, Alfie!" Dick said, too thrilled by the news to let anything dampen the moment. "Haven't you heard the news? Bruce is letting me meet--"

\* \* \*

><p>"--Clark!" Dick said.<p>

"And why is meeting Clark so special, Dick?" the voice asked.

"Well, 'cause he's the greatest! Next to Bruce, of course. I mean, no one, not even Clark, is better than Bruce...but Clark, well, he's super!" Dick's tone said that if I have to explain it to you, then obviously you'll never get it!

"Okay, Dick, you've met Clark. The day is over, and you're back home again, safe and warm, and tucked in bed. You're very tired, Dick. Meeting Clark was exciting, but it's been a long day, and you're only eleven years old. It's time for bed. You're going into a deep sleep."

Dick started hunching as if curling himself in bed under the covers. A small smile crossed his face as he fell into a deeper trance.

"Dick, when I snap my fingers, you're going to count backwards to nine. When you reach nine, you're going to remember your ninth birthday." The voice snapped her fingers.

"Ten...nine!" Dick stopped. The look of delighted astonishment on his face almost broke Bruce's heart. Dick was recalling the last birthday he ever spent with his parents.

\* \* \*

><p>"SURPRISE! HAPPY BIRTHDAY, DICKY!"<p>

"Oh, boy!" Dicky cried, excitedly. "A surprise birthday party! Mom! Dad! Everybody! You shouldn't have!"

"And why not, Dicky?" Pop Haly asked. "You are the star of Haly Circus, Dicky! Without the Flying Graysons and your amazing quadruple spin, our circus would probably have gone bankrupt by now. You've saved us, Dicky! You saved the circus!"

"Aw, cut it out, Mister Haly! You don't need us to survive. We're just another act. Besides, if anything ever happened to us...well, you know what they say--"

"--The SHOW MUST GO ON!" Everyone finished together laughing...

\* \* \*

><p>...The laughter abruptly changed to screams of terror!<p>

"MOM! DAD! NO-000-00!"

"NO-000-00!" Dicky cried, holding his hands out as if to stop the awful scene that was being replayed before him. Bruce jumped out of his seat from where he'd been observing the session.

Dicky shed inconsolable tears. He curled up in a tight ball. He wanted his Mom and Dad, but they were gone. There was no one left. No one!

The intrusive voice was saying nice, empty words that meant nothing. He couldn't hear anything, only the loud roaring in his ears from the crowds, from the sirens, from the screams.

Suddenly, Dicky felt two strong arms grab him by the shoulders and bring him in close. Strong arms that were telling him that everything was going to be all right. That the sun would come up again tomorrow. That life would go on. That hope still existed.

Dicky cried, deep heart-wrenching sobs, inside the protection of the strong arms. He cried until he didn't think he could cry any more. But the arms held him safely, and rocked him gently, and told him his Mom and Dad would always love him, and suddenly he felt at peace again, and the blackness started lifting.

**\*\*End of Part 5\*\***

## 6. Chapters 10 & 11

### **\*\*Chapter Ten\*\***

"When I count to three and snap my fingers, you'll feel yourself falling into a deep sleep, a soothing, calm, restful sleep...One, two, three!" The voice snapped her fingers.

Dick promptly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Bruce watched his sleeping son. The pain that marked his emotional turmoil was absent from Dick's face at the moment. Instead, Dick looked innocently, peacefully at rest. Bruce removed his sports jacket and covered Dick with it, tucking it closely around his neck.

Winters watched Bruce, feeling her heart go out to him. This session was taking almost as much of a toll on him as on Dick. Funny, he's not what I expected, Winters thought. I'd heard he was some kind of empty-headed playboy; instead, I see a deeply concerned father who's hurting inside for his son.

She caught Bruce's eyes and indicated they step outside of her office.

"We'll let him rest for a few minutes," she explained once outside. "He's been through a lot in the past hour. Why don't you and I go downstairs and grab a bite?"

Bruce looked uncertainly at the closed door. He did not like the idea of leaving Dick alone and unprotected.

"Don't worry about Dick, Mister Wayne," Winters said reading his mind. "He'll be fine, and he won't awaken until I tell him to." Bruce nodded reluctantly. As they turned to go, the door to Winters' outer office opened and MacCauley stepped in.

"Is it over?" he asked. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing important, David," Winters assured him. "Come on. The patient's resting for a few minutes, and we're gonna go grab a bite. Care to join us?"

"Hospital food?" MacCauley groaned. "That's worse than the slop they serve at HQ!" He sighed. "Oh, all right. Lead on, Doc!"

\* \* \*

><p>Tommy lounged comfortably in front of the wide-screen television set. He was watching an old TV show about a small town sheriff. It was one of his favorites while serving time in Blackgate. He loved to sit and watch the relationship between Sheriff Andy and his deputy, Barney. But more than anything, Tommy loved to watch Sheriff Andy and his little boy, Opie.<p>

In his daydreams, Tommy fantasized about being Opie and having a Pa like Sheriff Andy, who hugged you in a nice way, and sent you to your room when you were naughty, but didn't whip you, or throw you against the wall, or lock you in a dark closet.

He thought about little Billy, lying huddled, sleeping next to Mikey. Tommy had checked in on his brother about an hour ago. Mikey's arms were holding the boy, firmly and securely next to him. The boy's head was resting in the crook of Mikey's chin. Tommy couldn't help but smile at the picture. He was so glad that he was able to bring this bit of happiness to his brother.

He suddenly felt a cold hand clutch his insides. But how long would Mikey's happiness last? What if the boy started crying when Mikey tried to show him how much he loved him? What if he screamed?

They all did, Tommy realized unhappily. All of Mikey's pets screamed. Why? Tommy couldn't understand. Mikey wanted so much to be tender, to share his love, but the boys always screamed as if he were tearing them in half. It drove Mikey crazy. Just like Daddy.

Tommy stopped. Just like Daddy.

NO! He denied hotly. Mikey was nothing like Daddy. Daddy used to...used to...Tommy could remember his face being smothered in the pillow underneath, with Daddy on top of him. Daddy shouting, outraged, DON'T SCREAM, DAMN YOU! Pounding him with his fists to shut him up! To shut the screaming!

Daddy would force one or the other of the boys to watch as he repeatedly raped his brother.

"You're NEXT! Do you HEAR? You're NEXT!"

Tommy recalled how on several occasions, Daddy invited one of their "Uncles" to take part. While the "Uncle" assaulted Tommy, Daddy stood and watched, becoming aroused while holding Mikey and fondling him.



Mommy stood in the doorway, laughing, enjoying herself, and counting the money the "Uncle" had given her.

"NO! DADDY! NO!" Tommy cried. "It HURTS, DADDY! It HURTS!"

"Shut up!" Daddy yelled, slapping him across the mouth. "You're finally earning your keep, you little worthless pile of--"

Tommy shut his eyes at the painful memory, holding his head in his hands. He felt another headache coming on.

"Mikey isn't like that," Tommy said. "My brother's not like that!" But the still faces of each boy as Mikey tenderly sealed the plastic garbage bag over them, kept haunting Tommy's sleep.

And then, there was the "Punishment Room." Tommy tried to shut his eyes to this dark and frightening chamber of horrors that Mikey kept several doors down. It was a place that Tommy wouldn't go into. It was dark, like the closet. It was the place Mikey took his pets when they continued to disobey him. The last boy was all broken after Mikey, in a fit of rage, threw him against the corner.

Tommy remembered...

\* \* \*

><p>"From what you've described David, it appears that the kidnapper is escalating," Winters said. "His MO's been pretty set since he started. Cruise for hours. Find a mark, then bingo! Grab the kid and go!" She shook her head. "This one, on the other hand, has the hallmarks of stalking. The perp must've observed Billy closely, not just to know where he lived, but to know where he slept."<p>

"Don't you think it sounds like a different person?" Bruce asked. Winters looked at him curiously. "I mean, the first MO seems like that of a desperate person, someone willing to take exceptional risks in his undertaking. Billy's kidnapping looks well planned and executed. Someone who's less of a risk-taker, more methodical in his actions."

"He's right, David," Winters agreed. "If the kidnappers are the Gunther brothers, the way you believe, then the two different MO's indicate the actions of two different men. From everything I've read about them, Michael is the dominant brother. He has an explosive temper that just overwhelms Thomas into submission. Driving around and taking incredible chances like the first kidnappings are actions that he would undoubtedly do."

Winters placed her elbows on the table and leaned in.

"Under such a scenario," she continued, "I'd wager that Mikey would probably be the snatcher, and his brother, the driver."

"Makes sense," MacCauley broke in. "With Mikey's dominant personality, he'd tell Tommy where to drive, what to do, who to follow. Tommy, the submissive one, would go along."

"That's right," Winters agreed, thoughtfully. "On the other hand, sneaking a child from his bedroom without disturbing any other member of the household is not the work of a man like Mikey, who has all the

subtlety of a bull in a China shop. No, I think that this is definitely the work of the other brother, Tommy."

"But why would Tommy Gunther suddenly take charge of the operation?" asked MacCauley.

"Possibly because Mikey is growing increasingly agitated. He's probably beginning to see the unlikelihood of ever recapturing the boy he really wants." Winters looked at Bruce. "Your boy, Mister Wayne. He's obsessed with Dick. Wants him back."

Winters reached across the table and placed her hand on Bruce's arm.

"Dick's probably the only boy that Mikey was unable to fully possess," she surmised. "And it's driven him close to the edge after all these years. Unless they're taken off the streets and soon, we're going to have more escalating acts of violence from these two."

The three exchanged worried glances as Winters' disturbing words seemed to hang in the air between them.

\* \* \*

><p>Tommy wanted to forget, but he couldn't. It was indelibly scarred into his memory. The boy, Dicky...the beautiful, dark haired, blue-eyed boy who'd been his brother's single obsession for almost thirteen years. Tommy remembered the boy's almost superhuman natural agility, his speed, and desperation. He'd almost escaped from the rooftop, but he was only one, and the brothers, working in tandem, overpowered him.<p>

They already had another pet primed and ready. Tommy remembered how Mikey had fed him and lovingly cared for him, ensuring he had water, sufficient trips to the bathroom, TV, and games. The TV and games were what almost always won them over.

Back then, most of the boys they'd taken came from broken homes in poor neighborhoods. What the Gunthers offered them was more than they had at home. Most of the boys, although frightened, seemed to accept their new lives at first. But when the price of staying became obvious, they quickly changed their minds.

The younger ones became frightened and mostly just cowered in a corner and cried, wetting and soiling themselves in fear. The older ones became angry and belligerent. Some fought tooth and nail when Mikey approached. Eventually, Mikey decided to only take boys who were still too young and small to offer much resistance.

Everything changed after Dicky...

\* \* \*

><p>Dick thrashed on the couch, his dreams disturbed by monsters.<p>

"No," he moaned. "Pleeease! Stop it!" As the three lunch companions returned, they heard Dick crying out in his sleep. His moans could be easily heard in the outer office. Bruce immediately ran into Winters' office and hurried over to Dick. He was about to grab him by the

shoulders to wake him, when Winters stopped him.

"Talk to him, Mister Wayne. He'll listen to you. He trusts you unconditionally," she reminded him. His eyes boring into hers, Bruce considered her words, then nodded in agreement.

"Dick...Dick," he called softly. "Dick, it's me...It's Bruce." Dick continued his violent thrashing. Bruce changed tactics. His voice's timber changed, becoming deeper, almost threatening. "Dick, this is your father speaking! I want you to listen to me when I'm speaking to you, young man!"

Winters and MacCauley stared open-mouthed. That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, Winters was about to say.

However, almost as soon as the harsh words left Bruce's mouth, Dick's disquietude settled down. His face took on a sullen expression, but he obeyed his father.

"Yes, sir," Dick responded sulkily, crossing his arms. His body language spoke of typical adolescent rebellion coming in conflict with Dick's natural respect for his elders. Winters and MacCauley exchanged disbelieving glances.

"I'll have to ask Wayne for pointers on how to get Davey to fall in line," MacCauley muttered sotto voce.

"Thank you, Dick," Bruce said quietly. "Now I want you to settle down and listen to Doctor Winters. Do you understand me, Son?"

"Yes, sir," Dick replied, lower lip trembling, sounding hurt.

Bruce reached up and carefully brushed back a lock of Dick's hair that never seemed to stay in place. Dick's shut look relaxed at Bruce's touch. His face softened once more, taking on the same trusting and open demeanor he'd had earlier.

"Thank you, Dick," Bruce said, a smile in his voice. "I'm very proud of you, Son."

Dick beamed at the words.

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Eleven<strong>

"Hi, there, sleepy eyes."

The Voice startled Billy into full wakefulness. His bright blue eyes widened, becoming as huge as platters. His mouth was still gagged with the duct tape; therefore, his screams became high-pitched squealing sounds. Billy would've started kicking and pummeling the stranger lying next to him, but his arms and legs were firmly pinned.

Mikey smiled, tenderly running a single finger down his latest prize's baby soft cheek. He loved them this young. Everything he wanted to show them was new to them, making his yearning to bring

them happiness all the more poignant when he failed. This time he wasn't going to fail.

Dicky looked so small and helpless lying there next to him. This time, Mikey vowed he'd be careful. He wouldn't hit Dicky, or slam him against the wall, or yell at him, even if Dicky was extra bad and made him angry. This time Mikey wouldn't take him to the Punishment Room.

The last one came out all broken. Mikey didn't want to break this one. He wanted to keep him longer. This one was so pretty. As he ran his hand down the length of Dicky's tiny, stiffened body, Mikey felt himself growing aroused.

"No," he whispered huskily, "not yet, Dicky. It's too soon. I want to keep you a little longer." Mikey ran his tongue across the little boy's exposed cheek. Terrorized by the stranger, Billy turned his face as far away as he could.

NO! Billy's mind screamed. I want my Mommy and Daddy! But all he heard was his high-pitched squealing.

Mikey laughed, a gentle husky laugh, amused by Dicky's shyness.

Billy closed his eyes in fear. Mikey's laughter almost made him lose his self-control.

Mikey continued his tender exploration of Dicky's body. Gently, so as not to frighten him, Mikey removed Dicky's pajama top. The skinny, little torso, tanned from the summer sun, glistened from the droplets of perspiration that suddenly sprang from the boy.

Overcome with a growing need, Mikey moved his face in closer to the boy, breathing in Dicky's musky little boy smell. Unable to contain his increasing excitement, he began running his tongue across the tiny chest lying so defenselessly next to him, tasting him.

Billy felt the hot tears start falling. Stop it! Leave me alone, he wanted to scream. Don't touch me! DON'T!! Billy was growing increasingly agitated over his inability to scream. His mewling sounds grew higher in pitch. His panic increased exponentially. The monster kept Billy's arms pinned to his sides with his much stronger hands and arms, and kept the boy's legs from kicking with his own much larger and heavier ones over him.

Billy closed his eyes against this violation, hoping to make it go away. This was only a dream...It was happening to someone else...He was home with his Mommy and Daddy...

\* \* \*

><p>Bruce finally just remained on the couch next to Dick since it seemed that he was constantly needed to get up and quiet the boy's growing distress over the events unfolding in his mind. Dick stopped listening to Winters' gentle voice as he became increasingly agitated.<p>

"DRUGS?! NO!!" Dicky screamed in fear at the sight of the hypodermic. However, Tommy held him firmly and Mikey stuck the needle in his arm.

Within seconds, it seemed the world started melting around him.

"Dicky, listen to me," Doctor Winters' voice broke in. "I want you to remain focused and aware of what's going on around you...drugs or no drugs. Do you understand, Dicky? Tell me, what do you see?"

Dick's medical examination following his rescue revealed that the Gunthers used a sedative, which only caused a state of half-wakefulness. The medication did not render their victims completely unconscious, but rather quieted them sufficiently to be handled more easily. There was a good chance, therefore, that Dick had remained aware on a subconscious level of events surrounding him.

Dicky kept his eyes tightly clenched and shook his head firmly. He didn't want to see anything!

Winters looked at Bruce apologetically. Bruce looked sadly down at his son. He'd no idea the kind of hell the boy experienced that night. Bruce knew from the physical evidence left at the sight that a struggle had ensued, but he hadn't known just how violently those two animals handled the boy.

And Dick, with almost no training, was able to hold them off by himself for the better part of half an hour. He'd almost made good his escape as well. He might've succeeded if the odds had not been two grown men against one small boy.

"Dicky, do you hear me, son?" Bruce asked.

Dick became instantly still, listening for the voice that always meant a lifeline. He nodded reluctantly.

"Yes, sir," Dicky whispered.

"Dicky, I need you stay awake, son. Will you do that? Will stay awake for me?"

Dicky felt the tears start to fall.

"I don't want to," he protested. "I don't want to see!" Dicky began crying in heart-broken sobs. He wanted to do what Bruce asked...he wanted to! But he was so scared.

"Don't make me," he wailed. "Don't make me..." Dicky sat up in his sleep, holding out his arms for solace.

Bruce took Dick in his arms and held him tightly. He felt his own eyes begin to water. Enough was enough! He was not going to put his boy through any more pain.

"It's okay, son," Bruce whispered. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. You've been a very brave boy, Dicky...and I'm very proud of you."

Dicky continued to sob in his father's arms.

\* \* \*

><p>Tommy heard the high pitched squeals coming from Mikey's room. Aw, gee, come on, Mikey! Not yet! You promised! Tommy jumped up from where he'd been reclining and ran towards the back bedroom.<p>

As he approached the closed door, he could hear Mikey's crooning, a soft caressing voice, hypnotic in its tone.

"Shhh-shh-sh, little one," he intoned. "No need to be afraid. You're home, now. Home to stay. And no one's ever taking you away from me again."

Tommy opened the bedroom door, and was stopped by what he saw. Little Billy, still gagged and struggling feebly was now completely nude and being held gently, but firmly on Mikey's lap. Mikey was still wearing his shorts, but even from where he was standing, Tommy could tell that his brother was fully aroused.

"Aw, Mikey, come on, man!" he cried, put out. "You promised! It's too soon, bro!" As he was chastising his brother, Tommy walked determinedly towards the bed to try to wrest the boy from Mikey.

Mikey looked up confused. He saw Tommy approaching and his eyes took on a dangerous glint. Dicky was his! Tommy had given him to him. Mikey's grip on the boy tightened. No one was taking him away!

"He's mine, Tommy!" Mikey warned. "You can't have him!"

Tommy stopped midway, holding his arms out in the open.

"Of course, he's yours, bro. I gave him to you, remember? But it's too soon, man. You know that. Remember the rules...Rule number one..." Tommy stopped, waiting for Mikey to repeat after him. "Come on, Mikey, say it! Rule Number One--! SAY IT, MIKEY!"

Mikey's lower lip stuck out sullenly. He wouldn't meet his brother's eyes. It wasn't fair...Dicky was his! Why couldn't he show him already? He looked up at Tommy's impatient stance and reluctantly nodded his head.

"Rule Number One," Mikey dutifully recited. "No Lessons on the first night! Let the boy eat, sleep, and get used to his new home."

"That's good, Mikey," Tommy said encouragingly. "And what's Rule Number Two?"

"Rule Number Two...games and TV only on the second day...if he wins at his favorite game, then we'll order take out."

"And--!" Tommy started, but was interrupted.

"And Rule Number Three...no special touching before Day Three!" Mikey looked unhappy at the prospect. He had to wait another two whole days before he could show Dicky how much he loved him.

"That's very good, Mikey," Tommy said. "I'm so proud of you, bro. And you know why we made these rules, right?"

"So that my pets wouldn't get all broken so soon anymore?" Mikey

asked looking up for confirmation.

"That's right, Mikey. And, also because if you play with them first, and show them you're their friend, then..."

"...then, they'll want me to show them how much I love them, right?" Mikey asked excitedly.

"Right!" Tommy's excitement mirrored his brother's. "So, Mikey, will you be a good boy, and put little Dicky's pajamas back on him?"

"Aw, do I have to, Tommy? He's so beautiful, what does he need clothes for? Can't I just look at him? I promise I'll be good."

Tommy just gave him a look of utter disbelief.

"Okay, okay!" Mikey said hurriedly. "Sheesh, what a drill sergeant! Citing rules and regulations!"

Tommy stood arms-crossed, waiting for his brother to finish. It was the middle of the afternoon of the first day! They hadn't even made through the first night. How was he going to keep Mikey away from the boy for another two and a half days?

\* \* \*

><p>Bruce finally helped quiet Dick's restive protests. The exhausted young man was lying back down again. He was still tossing in his endless nightmare, but he hadn't cried out in a few minutes. Bruce glared at MacCauley, then at Winters. He suddenly stood and motioned for them to follow him to the outer office.<p>

"It's over! I want him brought back. Now!" Bruce demanded, his dark eyes looking like blue smoldering embers.

Winters was taken aback by the violence she could detect behind those eyes. She realized for the first time just what a dangerous man Bruce Wayne actually was. Air-headed playboy, Winters wondered? Maybe in another plane of existence!

"Wayne, be reasonable," MacCauley said. "The boy's getting close. Of course, he's frightened...He went through a traumatic experience, but he's safe here. And this is for his own good, too." MacCauley paused. "Cadet Grayson said it himself. If he doesn't do this, he'll always wonder what really happened to him. Do you want that on your conscious?"

Bruce whirled on the man, jabbing his finger into MacCauley's chest.

"Don't presume to speak for my son, MacCauley! And don't try your mind games on me! You'll find me a formidable opponent." The two men glared at each other with neither backing down.

"This isn't about us Wayne! And it isn't about you! It's about four dead boys and one who's still missing. It's about four families whose lives have been shattered, because they're never going to watch their sons grow up. It's about a mother and father who're in the middle of a living nightmare right now, wondering if their little boy will be

found in a garbage bag tomorrow!" MacCauley grabbed Bruce's wrist, and deliberately removed it from his chest.

"Speak for your son? No, Mister Wayne, I don't presume to speak for your son. I'm speaking for all those dead boys whose voices have been permanently silenced. I'm speaking for Billy, who's probably terrified right now, and wondering why he's not home with his Mommy and Daddy. I'm speaking for the good citizens of Bludhaven, whom your son has sworn to serve and protect." He studied Bruce closely, gauging the effect of his words. "Who do you speak for, Mister Wayne?"

Deathly calm and mirroring MacCauley's deliberate moves, Bruce enclosed his free hand around MacCauley's wrist and applied a vice-like pressure. MacCauley's eyes squinted from the unexpected pain, and he involuntarily released his hold.

Bruce turned his back on both MacCauley and Winters. MacCauley's words had stopped him short. His first instinct was to protect Dick. Bruce felt that he'd failed his boy in too many ways to count; and yet, Dick's hypnosis session revealed his unwavering faith in his mentor, and his eagerness to please him.

Such naked openness stabbed at Bruce's conscience. How could he be expected to use Dick's trust in him, by forcing him to face the monsters of his past? And yet, wasn't that what Dick specifically said that he wanted?

Bruce went completely still. He didn't turn to look at MacCauley or acknowledge his words. Finally, visibly relaxing, Bruce ran his hand through his hair, turned to face the others, and nodded his acquiescence.

"Very well, Captain MacCauley, Doctor Winters," Bruce agreed. "But I call the shots...if Dick approaches a memory that's too terrifying, or that he simply can't bear to witness again, then I say whether or not he can bypass it."

MacCauley looked like he was going to protest, but Bruce held his hand up to stop him.

"That's my final word...Take it or leave it!"

"All right, Wayne," MacCauley surrendered. "You win this round, but next time-!"

"MacCauley, pray that there will not be a next time!" Bruce replied.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hello, chum," the deep, warm voice resonated within Dick. "Do you know me?"<p>

Dick nodded tiredly.

"Yes...Bruce..." he whispered.

"How are feeling, partner?"



"I'm so tired...Can we go home?" Dick yawned exhausted.

"Not quite yet, chum," Bruce said regretfully, "but soon, I promise."

"I want to go home," Dick whimpered softly. "I'm tired..."

"Dicky, I promise that if you solve this riddle for me, we'll head back to the barn soon afterwards. Are you with me, chum?"

Dick nodded his head sleepily.

"Okay, Dicky, tell me, 'What steals children from their Mommy and Daddy and never gives them back'?"

Dick squinted, confused. That wasn't a riddle...the Riddler would never make one up like that.

"Don't you mean, 'Who'?" Dicky asked. "'Who steals children from their Mommy and Daddy...'?"

"You're right, partner," Bruce agreed readily. "That's exactly what I meant. 'Who steals children...'?"

"A child snatcher?" Dicky answered confused. "What kind of a riddle is that?" Dicky asked becoming angry. "You're trying to trick me! I don't want to play anymore! I'm gonna tell Alfred! He says it's not right to cheat!"

"And he's absolutely correct, chum," Bruce replied. "Cheating is wrong. I'm proud of you for knowing the difference between right and wrong."

Dicky sat back sulkily, his arms crossed. He wanted to go home!

"Tell me, Son...is stealing wrong?"

Dicky nodded impatiently. When was he going home?

"Would you stop someone if you caught him in the act of stealing, say, a CD player?"

"Of course!" Dicky said, growing increasingly annoyed.

"Then why won't you help us stop the child snatcher? He stole a child from his Mommy and Daddy. Or is a CD player more important than a little boy?"

Dicky began to grow agitated again. Tears began forming, but he fought them back.

MacCauley looked at Bruce with awed respect. Wayne must be a hell of a cutthroat businessman, MacCauley mused. He's not pulling any punches with his own kid.

"Is a stolen CD player more important than a little boy who's been taken from his parents?" Bruce's relentless voice continued. "You were taken once, and Alfred and I did everything to get you back. Do you remember?"

Dicky shook his head, no. NO! he wanted to say! Finally, Dicky found his voice.

"But I'm scared...the monsters are waiting for me on the other side...Don't let them take me, again..."

"Don't worry, chum," Bruce's quiet voice reassured him. "No one's ever taking you away from me again. You have my word."

"Pinky swear?" Dicky asked innocently. Mom always used to Pinky swear.

After a short pause, Bruce's voice responded, "Pinky swear."

Dicky heard the smile in Bruce's voice...Dad used to have a smile in his voice...Dicky squinted, remembering. Bruce was his Dad now. He smiled in recollection.

"Bruce?"

"Yes, chum?"

Dicky smiled again, shyly.

"I'm glad you're my Dad now."

**\*\*End of Part 6\*\***

## 7. Chapters 12 & 13

### **\*\*Chapter Twelve\*\***

"You have to keep your eyes open, chum. Dicky, you have to open your eyes."

Dick's respiration was coming in short, rapid breaths. His brow glistened from sweat; his dark hair was tangled and matted. He kept his eyes tightly shut, refusing to open them, to look beyond the door on the other side in his mind. He screwed his face up, refusing to acknowledge Bruce. He was mad at Bruce. Bruce wanted him to do something he didn't want to do, after he'd promised that he wouldn't.

"You promised," Dicky wailed in a small voice. "You promised..."

"Dicky, I want you to think about how you felt when you lost your Mom and Dad."

Bruce heard Winters' involuntary gasp in the background. He gave her a flitting cold glance. It was obvious that Bruce hated himself for what he was doing.

"Noo-ooo," Dicky cried brokenheartedly. "Don't..."

"You felt very sad and lonely, didn't you?"

Dicky nodded petulantly.

"How do you think your Mom and Dad would've felt if it had been you who'd fallen and not them? Would they have been sad?"

Dicky nodded reluctantly.

"Why, chum?"

"Because I was their little boy?" he asked in a small voice.

"That's right, son. But now you're my little boy, and I know that I would be very sad if I lost you."

"The Joker?" Dicky whispered.

"..." Bruce blinked in surprise. He hoped that MacCauley and Winters would chalk up the reference to the Batman's archenemy as a natural fear of a child who'd grown up in Gotham City. "That's right, Dicky...the Joker."

Dicky swallowed, then struggling fiercely to conquer his fear of the dark, he slowly opened his eyes. He immediately covered them with his hands!

"NO!" he screamed, terrified.

"Dicky, what do you see, son?"

Dicky turned on his side, facing the wall, his hands still covering his eyes. Bruce looked on helplessly. Arriving at a decision, Bruce reached up and took Dick by the shoulder, turning him around.

"Dicky, listen to me!"

Dick shook his, no!

"Richard Grayson, listen to me when I speak to you, young man!"

Dick stiffened immediately. That was a voice that you did not ignore, no matter how scared you were. Sniffing slightly, Dick waited for whatever punishment was coming.

"Dick, I want you to play a game with me. Will you?"

Dick's interest was caught immediately. A game? Dick nodded eagerly.

Bruce's change of tactics caught Winters' and MacCauley's attention instantly. What was he up to?

"All right, son. How old are you?"

Dick looked confused. What kind of a game was this?

"Nine."

"No, Dick, you're not nine, son. You're twenty-two. Don't you remember? You, Alfred, Barbara, Tim, and I celebrated your twenty-second birthday together. It was your last birthday before the

earthquake. Don't you remember?"

Dick screwed his face in consternation.

"Babs?" he asked uncertainly.

"That's right. Babs was there. You like her, don't you?"

Dick smiled, nodding shyly.

"I think she likes you, too."

Dick's smile broadened.

"You don't want to be nine anymore, do you?"

Dick emphatically shook his head, no.

"That's good, son. Now, here's the game. I want you to remain twenty-two years old. You're a police academy cadet, and you've been trained in the art of observation. Are you with me?"

Dick nodded curtly. His entire demeanor changed.

"Good. I need you to report what nine-year-old Dicky sees. Do you understand?"

Dick looked suddenly uncertain. He felt his heart rate increase and his palms go clammy. Get a grip, Grayson. Bruce wants you to give him a report.

"Yes, sir," Dick responded.

"Dick, you'll have to go back again. You have to go back and help Dicky tell us what he sees. Can you do that, chum? Dicky needs your help. He's only nine, and he's scared. But you're a grown man now. You can help Dicky face down his monsters."

Dick listened intently. Dicky needed him. He had to help his younger self face those monsters. Dick knew that it would come to this; he'd always known. He'd been waiting all of these years, growing stronger until he was better able to stare down the monster and finally defeat him in hand to hand battle.

Dick's voice changed in timber, growing deeper, more confident.

"Don't worry, Bruce. I can handle things on my end. Tell Captain MacCauley that as soon as I find out anything, I'll report back." With that, Dick fell into a deep trance.

\* \* \*

><p>"Dick, what do you see?" Bruce's voice sounded in his head. Dick reached up into his ear to adjust his miniature satcom transceiver. They weren't using code names on this mission. Dick wasn't sure why, but Bruce was the boss.<p>

Dick opened his eyes and scanned the immediate vicinity. He felt strangely displaced, as if he were viewing the world through someone

else's eyes. Of course, he suddenly realized. He was seeing things through a nine-year-old's eyes. He looked down at himself. Everything was smaller, his hands, his feet, even his pants.

A sudden vision from his nightmare sent a shudder through his entire being. He shut eyes at the memory, feeling the sweat break out again.

"Dicky, the boss wants us to report. Now, open your eyes so that we can carry out our orders, kid."

Bruce watched as Dick deliberately opened his eyes and looked around.

"I'm lying on something hard and cold," he reported. He willed himself to turn his head. "There's a closed door to my immediate left. It looks about a thousand miles away. Probably a side-effect of the sedative they gave Dicky." He could feel Dicky's mounting fear. The little boy was fighting him all the way.

"I'm scared," Dicky sobbed. "I don't want to open the door."

"Hey, hang in there, partner," Dick encouraged his younger self. "We'll face these dragons together! I won't let you fall into enemy hands, I promise."

Bruce and the others sat back listening, amazed as Dick's adult persona spoke to and encouraged his younger self to be brave. Winters especially watched with interest. In all her years as a clinical psychologist, she'd never witnessed anything like this!

"Come on, Dicky," Dick said. "I can't do this without you. I need you to sit up." Dick slowly started sitting up on the couch. "That's it, kid! You're doing great!"

His face changed to Dicky, who shook his head emphatically, and looked like he was about to start crying again.

"Hey, none of that, partner! Remember, we're Flying Graysons...defying death is a family trait!" Dick gave his best daredevil grin. Dick brought his hand up to his ear again to report in.

"I think the kid is learning to cope with his fear, Bruce. But I can still feel it eating away at him. I'll keep trying to encourage him." He grinned again. "We all have our personal Jokers to face, eh?"

Not waiting for a response, Dick turned inwardly to Dicky's plight.

"Come on, Dicky, you're almost at the door. Just a few more steps." The nearer they got to the closed door, the more Dick thought he could hear something. "Bruce, I think I hear voices coming from the other side. Stand by." Dick's voice took on his "encouraging" tone again. "Dicky, you have to open the door, kid. I can't do it...only you can."

Dicky stood still, his hand reaching for the doorknob. Dick could feel the boy's fear as if it were palpable. His younger self was shaking in fright. He couldn't move. The angry Voice from the other

side had him frozen in terror.

"It's the Voice," he whispered. "The Voice in my dreams. The one that's always doing bad things to me. Hurting me."

Dick spoke gently. In his mind, he saw himself holding the younger boy by the arms.

"Dicky, listen to me...the Voice can't hurt us anymore. It's a ghost, Dicky...a ghost from the past that's been haunting us for a long, long time. I think it's about time that we showed this Voice that it can't scare us anymore. Don't you agree?"

Dicky looked surprised.

"You mean, you're scared, too? But you're grown up."

Dick smiled a little sadly at his younger self.

"Hey, partner, you're going to find out as you grow older that there a lot more things out there that can scare you. But you know what? You also find out that you can face down most of your fears."

"Does Bruce ever get scared?" Dicky asked awed.

"Bruce get scared?" Dick scoffed. Then smiling gently, he added, "Who do think taught me about facing down my fears?"

Dicky gave him a nova-bright smile in response.

"That's the Flying Graysons spirit, Dicky. Now, I want you to take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. Then, I you want to reach for that doorknob and very slowly, and carefully, open it just a crack so that we can take a peek."

Dicky nodded. Taking a deep breath, he did everything as Dick instructed. Dicky wasn't prepared for the horrors awaiting him on the other side, but his adult self already suspected the worst. What he saw sent a spine-tingling chill down his back.

Mikey was raping a small boy, no older than Dicky. The boy was screaming in pain, terror, and outrage at the violation.

"DON'T SCREAM! DON'T SCREAM!" Mikey yelled, his frenzy building to an explosive violence. Reaching with one hand, he pushed the boy's face into the pillow below him, then began pummeling him repeatedly with his free hand for defying him.

Dicky wanted to turn his head, to walk away from the horrifying scene, but Dick's voice held him in place.

"I'm showing you how much I love you, you ungrateful brat! No one loves you like I do! No one ever will! Don't you understand?" Mikey repeatedly beat the boy in time to each word that he uttered. Climaxing, Mikey collapsed on top of the small child. The boy had long since ceased his struggles.

Eventually, Mikey noticed that his victim was no longer moving. He stood up, gazing down at the boy. Dick saw that there wasn't an inch on the boy's back that wasn't discolored from bruising. He was also

bleeding from several places.

Mikey cried out in sorrow.

"NO! I didn't want to hurt you! Why were you bad? Why did you make me hurt you?" He picked up the boy. Dick watched the boy's head move at a sickening angle.

"The boy's neck was broken," the adult Dick reported dispassionately.

In a fit of anger, Mikey threw the limp form against the wall, then stomped on him in a frenzy. Stopping, Mikey stood looking down, breathing heavily.

"Why did you have to scream?" he asked. Turning sadly, he spotted Dicky standing at the door. "Do you see what happens when you disobey, Dicky? But you're not going to be like him are you?" He paused, puzzled. "You shouldn't be up, yet, Dicky. The stuff we gave you doesn't wear out for another ten hours. Tommy won't let me play with you for almost three days. Those are the Rules, Dicky, and Tommy is a strict enforcer."

Mikey walked up to Dicky and took his chin in his hand.

"You're the most beautiful boy I've ever seen, Dicky. I love you more than all the others. Do you believe me?"

Dicky looked up him frightened.

"I promise I won't hurt you, Dicky. I just want to show you how much I love you. Will you let me?" He smiled suddenly. "Tommy isn't home, Dicky...and when the cat's away..." He grabbed Dicky's wrist in excitement and led him to the bloodstained bed he'd just abandoned. Dicky began balking.

"No," he whispered; his voice was almost frozen in his throat. "Don't, please..."

"Dicky, whatever happened to you, you have to see it through, buddy. I won't leave you, I promise," Dick said. "Bruce, I don't know if I can do this. I want to kill this guy. He just murdered that other kid in front of me. Now he's leading Dicky to the same bed where he just raped and murdered the other one! If I ever get my hands on this monster...Wait! Something's happening!"

Mikey sat down on the bed and brought Dicky up to him. He held him tenderly in his arms and slowly began running his hands up and down the boy's body. Dicky struggled feebly, the effect of the drug slowing down his reflexes. Mikey smiled, taking Dicky's lack of fighting as apparent acquiescence.

Dicky tried hitting those awful, obscene hands with his smaller weaker ones, but he was too tired to struggle effectively. The next thing he knew, Mikey was quickly undressing him, and once he was completely nude, Mikey held him close to him. Dick could feel the man's arousal next to him.

"NO!" He screamed weakly. "No! Don't TOUCH ME!" Dicky suddenly felt something hard and heavy knock the wind out of him.

"DON'T SCREAM!" Mikey yelled. "You're not supposed to scream!"

Dicky was very close to losing consciousness. The knock he felt was Mikey punching him with the force of a Mack truck. Dicky felt a sharp pain in his rib area.

Dick mentally rushed to Dicky's side.

"You have to hold on, partner!" he urged. "You've got to be brave! I know it hurts, but if you concentrate on my voice, the pain will go away, I promise!"

Dicky squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted it all to go away. Dicky didn't want to see any more. But the voice in his head, kept urging him to be brave and pay attention to the horrors going on around him.

Dicky fought against the pain at his side. It hurt to breathe...fighting his blurring vision, Dicky looked down. A large, callused hand was holding him tightly by his exposed abdomen, causing a knife-like pain to go shooting up from his hurt side. He almost lost his hold on reality from the searing, white-hot pain. A second hand was obscenely fondling him where no was allowed to touch him.

"NO-OOO-OO! Don't TOUCH ME!" It wasn't allowed! Mom and Dad had said so!

"DON'T SCREAM! I LOVE YOU, DICKY!! AND I'M GOING TO SHOW YOU, RIGHT NOW!" Mikey spun him around, and savagely struck him twice across the face. Dicky tasted blood immediately.

Dicky shut his ears against the Mikey's menacing voice. He wouldn't listen! He wouldn't look! But those hands, crawling all over him, making him feel dirty, he opened his eyes once more, and saw a cobra leaping out from the empty eye socket of a skull. Dicky felt his scream choke in his throat. He was losing consciousness. Mikey was smothering him to stem his screams!

"Dicky, try and stay with me, partner," Dick urged. "Don't go down, yet, kid. I know it's awful, but you're doing great! Look into yourself, Dicky...Reach inside for that added strength. The kind Mom and Dad had...the kind Bruce taught us..."

Suddenly, Dicky could breathe again, but the room was going gray all around him. In the background, as if through a dull roar, he heard voices raised in anger.

"Bruce, it's the other brother...For some reason, he's stopped Mikey from actually raping Dicky. Wait, let me hear what they're saying."

"You know the Rules, Mikey!" Tommy yelled. "No Lessons on the first night! Look at him! You've already hurt him. He's bleeding from his mouth and nose, and it looks like you broke his ribs, or something."

"He shouldn't've screamed, Tommy! I told him...I warned him not to scream!"



"Of course, he screamed, Mikey! He's scared. It's his first night here. What are the rules, huh? Recite the rules, Mikey!"

Dicky heard Mikey's sullen recitation, and Dick dutifully reported them to Bruce.

"And why do we have theses rules, Mikey?"

"So that I don't break my pets too soon," Mikey replied in a subdued voice.

"That's right, bro. And look at what you did to the other kid. He's the third one in just two weeks, bro! What was his name? Paul Something. Well, there's no helping it now. Go get a garbage bag so's we can take the trash out."

"Can't I stay with Dicky?" Mikey asked in a small voice. Tommy sighed.

"No, and I'm going to dress him, so that you're not tempted to break the rules again!"

Dicky felt rough hands touching him again. This was more humiliation than his poor abused soul could take. He finally fell into a dark, black abyss...

\* \* \*

><p>"Dick, when I count to three, you're going to wake up. You'll remember everything you saw today, Dick. These are your memories. They're just no longer distorted from a child's frightened point of view. You've faced your monsters, Dick. There won't be any more nightmares. Do you understand?"<p>

Dick nodded. He felt at peace for the first time in a long time.

"One, two, three..." Doctor Winters quiet, soothing voice woke him up.

Dick blinked his eyes. Someone had drawn the blinds, letting in the late afternoon sun. He sat up slowly, holding his hands to his eyes. Finally, dropping his hands, he looked up at Winters. He smiled uncertainly.

"How'd I do, Doc?" he asked.

"You'll remember everything in good time, Dick. Don't worry about that. Just give your jumbled memories a chance to settle down. I promise that when everything starts coming back, it won't be with the same sense of dread that you had previously."

"Do you remember anything, Dick?"

Dick turned to where Bruce was standing in the shadows. Bruce slowly emerged into the light. Dick smiled.

"Yeah, I remember you being there for me, Bruce. Thanks."

Bruce gave him an enigmatic half-smile.

"What are fathers for?"

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Chapter Thirteen<strong>

Billy lay in the dark, his eyes tightly shut against the world. When were his Mommy and Daddy coming for him? He didn't like either Mikey or Tommy. Tommy was the bad man that took him from his room. He kept telling Mikey, that he couldn't touch "Dicky" tonight, but Billy knew that the day was coming when Tommy would say it was all right.

But Mikey scared him even more. Until Tommy walked in and stopped him, Mikey was touching Billy everywhere, including places that made him feel bad. Also, Mikey had a scary picture on the back of his right hand of an attacking snake jumping out at you from the eye socket of a skull. Billy closed his eyes every time he thought of that snake.

And Mikey kept looking at him funny. Like he wanted to eat him, or something. Billy remembered Mikey's tongue running down his torso and shuddered at what it could mean.

And Mikey kept calling him "Dicky"!

Billy felt the tears start to fall. When he tried to tell Mikey that his name was "Billy," Mikey slapped him across the mouth. Billy curled up into a tiny ball. He hid his head on his pillow to hide his sobs.

"Mommy...Daddy, where are you?"

\* \* \*

><p>"That's them," Nightwing said, pointing. He looked up and grinned ferally. "Let's go, partner!"<p>

Batman nodded. He shot out a jumpline and swooped in, a giant frightening shadow descending from the blackness of the night. Nightwing simply dove off the roof, executing an elaborate series of somersaults and ricocheting off the neighboring building's walls. Batman had showmanship, but Nightwing...well, he liked to think that he had style!

"Party's over, scum!" Nightwing growled. "We're crashing it!"

"Get 'em!" someone shouted. Automatic gunfire rang through the air, bullets whizzing by Nightwing's head.

Nightwing cartwheeled and leaped over the heads of the two shooters. On his return arc, he kicked straight out, knocking them both out.

"Lights out! Rats belong in the dark!" Yep, Grayson, you've got style!

Meanwhile, working silently but as effectively, the Dark Knight took out a half dozen of the vermin in about as many minutes. By the time the dust settled, the former Dynamic Duo were standing over the unconscious bodies of almost twenty of Blockbuster's enforcers and movers.

However, they were interested in only two, Vinnie the Gimp and Al the Eraser. These were the names that Sable had given Batman the previous night. Holding both in one hand each by the collar, Nightwing began interrogating them.

"We ain't got to tell you nuthin'!" Vinnie squeaked. "We got rights!"

"You got nothing, scum!" Nightwing replied. "Look at this costume...Do I look like the police?" Dick felt an unexpected twinge of conscience at his statement, but this was something he had to do!

"Now, listen to me, and listen good, 'cause I'm only gonna ask you once. I'm only interested in one thing. If you give me the skinny on what I need, I let you go. Otherwise, I turn you over to my partner!"

Nightwing swung them around forcibly. There, standing in the circle of the single streetlight, was the formidable figure of Batman. Nightwing's two prisoners immediately went weak at the knees. If Nightwing hadn't been holding them by their respective collars, both would've fallen down at that point.

"The Bat!" Vinnie squeaked. "It's the Bat!"

"Y-y-you can't!" Al pleaded. "Bludhaven's your town, kid! This ain't Gotham City! The Bat ain't got no right to bust heads here!"

Feeling secretly pleased at the "your town" comment, Nightwing gave them a flinty smile, sending cold shivers down their spines.

"So, do you cooperate? Or do I extradite you into the Batman's capable hands?" Nightwing's words reduced both of the hardcases into blubbering babies.

"Whut--whut d'you wanna know, Wingster?"

"Anything, you want, kid, just keep the Bat away from me!"

"Okay, boys...what do you know about a couple of mean-looking dudes, probably escaped cons from Blackgate, who've been ripping off your boss? Hijacking Blockbuster's trucks carrying looted electronics games and equipment, and also toys and other stuff that appeals to kids?"

"Th-th-that's it, kid? Th-th-that's all you wanna know?"

"That's about the size of it," Nightwing assured them smiling.

"There's talk in the streets that these two losers are the scumbuckets who've been snatching kids and icing 'em. Y-y-you after 'em, Wingster?"

"I hope you catch 'em, kid...they're bad news. They're lower than scum."

"Yeah, yeah, your concern really touches me, Vinnie...yours, too, Al. Considering that Batman and I just broke up a drug shipment with a street value of over a billion dollars! And most of these drugs were slated to end up being shot into the veins or sniffed up the noses of hundreds of kids."

"Heh, Wingster, this is business! You pays your money. You takes your chances! But, those two short eyes! They're not businessmen. They're vampires! I want 'em off the street as much as the next guy." At Nightwing's silent, cold stare, he added defensively, "Hey! I've got kids of my own! Those vampires try anything with my kid, I drive a stake through their hearts! A stake!"

"Okay, spare me the metaphors, Vinnie," Nightwing said impatiently. "What do you know about them? Their hangouts or possible hideout?"

"Hey, Wingster, if Blockbuster knew that, I would've erased them long ago!" Al interjected. "Nobody steals from Blockbuster if he wants to live to see his old age."

"What can you tell me?" Nightwing asked simply.

Vinnie and Al exchanged glances.

"If we tell you, how do we know you'll let us go?" Vinnie asked.

"How do you know my friend here won't do a serious number on you if you don't?"

Vinnie and Al gulped and quickly began to talk.

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley felt a slight breeze from the open window in his office. It stirred a couple of papers on his desk as he worked late. He wasn't really paying much attention, though. He was finishing his investigative report on the Billy Grady kidnapping.<p>

As he went through his paperwork, MacCauley reflected on Cadet Grayson's hypnosis session. The young man's raw pain and terror at facing down the horrific ghosts from his past sent shivers of sympathy through MacCauley's soul. As he watched Bruce Wayne's reaction to his adopted son's agony, MacCauley's heart went out to the man. He never would've figured that Wayne, a man with a vacuous playboy reputation, could've felt the genuine love and concern that he'd demonstrated for his son.

MacCauley glanced at his desk clock and sighed. It looked like he wouldn't be home in time to tuck in his own son tonight.

"We have some information you could find useful."

MacCauley dropped everything, instantly diving underneath his desk and drawing his weapon.

"Whoever you are, I'm armed! This is your only warning!"

"Really, MacCauley, under the desk? What do you think this is? An air raid warning? We have information...do you want to see it?"

MacCauley cautiously looked around his desk. Sitting, legs crossed, and looking quite relaxed, was a young man dressed in black tights with a midnight blue stylized wing across his chest. His mask seemed to be in the shape of a bat. MacCauley noted the heavy gauntlets and boots.

MacCauley's back stiffened when he saw the sardonic smile on the young man's lips.

"Nightwing, I presume?"

Nightwing's countenance immediately transformed as he gave MacCauley a wide, beaming smile. MacCauley felt momentarily taken aback. Where had he seen that smile before?

"Hey! I heard that you were quite the investigator," Nightwing teased, then turned serious. "I have some information about a planned heist tonight of a van carrying stolen toys and video games."

"Look, Nightwing, or whatever you call yourself. I have a murder investigation going right now! Take your information to Robbery. I don't have time for this!"

"The toys, Captain MacCauley, are the kind specifically designed to appeal to little boys." Nightwing held the list out to MacCauley.

MacCauley studied the list carefully.

"All right. I'll bite. Talk to me," he said sitting back down again.

Nightwing gave him that nova-bright smile again.

"I'll let my, uh, friend explain it to you." Nightwing gestured simply with his left hand. A dark, menacing figure appeared out of the shadows as if it'd been a ghost.

Batman's sudden appearance startled MacCauley out of ten years. He jumped out of his seat, dropping his pen involuntarily.

"Yiii!" MacCauley yelped. "What are trying to do? Give me a heart attack?" He was holding his chest area as he spoke.

Nightwing rolled his eyes upward. "He has that effect on everybody. I've told him he should change his image a bit. You know, something less dark and not quite so grim."

Batman ignored him and began speaking directly to MacCauley. Nightwing's grin broadened slightly. That's my Dad, he thought proudly.

"Blockbuster is setting a trap for whoever's been ripping off his

illegal shipments of stolen goods. We believe that the hijackers are the Gunthers who've probably stolen from Blockbuster in the past in order to furnish their hideout with toys and other things that appeal to boys."

"Yeah, he's setting a trap 'cause even Blockbuster wouldn't bother his crooked cops to stop someone from taking his latest shipment of stolen G.I. Joes!" Nightwing said sarcastically.

MacCauley jumped up and got right up to Nightwing's face.

"Listen you, Mister Junior Tights! Nobody comes into my office and badmouths the BHPD! You hear?! I've lost a lot of friends in the service of this godforsaken town, and no one...NO ONE insults their memory!" MacCauley studied Nightwing with a slightly curling lip. "Especially, some young punk who's too much of a coward to join the force and play by the rules. You Bat-guys may have some kind of carte blanche in Gotham City, but this is my town! We follow the rule of law here! No vigilante justice!"

"Tell me another one, MacCauley," Nightwing jeered. "I've been in this town for almost a year now, and I can count the number of honest cops I've met on one hand. Yeah, you have a tough job, MacCauley, but it's made even tougher by the corruption that permeates the force. What's more, you know it!" Nightwing stood up, too.

"For what it's worth, I think you're an honest cop, MacCauley. That's why my friend and I came to you. We think you can stop the ambush going down tonight. Meanwhile, we stop the Gunthers."

"Your faith in me touches me deeply, Mister Junior Vigilante," MacCauley said sarcastically. "And just what would you two know about my investigation of the Gunthers?"

"You forget, MacCauley. The Gunthers escaped from Blackgate Prison. Batman takes that personally."

"Nightwing called me in," Batman interrupted, "because I've dealt with them in the past. I'm familiar with their MO and Signature. If the Gunthers are operating according to their MO, then the Grady boy may still be alive. But we're working under pressure here, MacCauley. Billy Grady only has about another day, before Mikey loses control." He seemed to become even more threatening. "Will you work with us?"

MacCauley stared at the two masked men. There was something almost tangibly familiar about them, something nagging at the back of MacCauley's mind. He gave himself a mental headshake. Get a grip, MacCauley. Probably something out of one of your worst nightmares, he thought ruefully.

MacCauley turned his back to them, trying to regain his composure. Still not facing them, MacCauley finally nodded, accepting their help.

"Okay, vigilantes, I'll play ball, but I've gotta get my task force out of bed and assembled. That'll take me about a half hour."

"The heist isn't due to go down for another two hours," Nightwing said. "You take care of Blockbuster's men. We'll take care of the

Gunthers!"

"No way! This a BHPD operation!" MacCauley spun around to face down any protests. "I want you two pajama-clad characters to stay out of our way!"

His office was empty. MacCauley felt a momentary icy hand grip his insides.

"I wonder if this ever happens to Jim Gordon?"

\*\*End of Part 7\*\*

## 8. Chapters 14 & 15

### \*\*Chapter Fourteen\*\*

"Mikey, I don't like this!" Tommy said worriedly. "How do we know we can trust that mope, Vinnie, who gave us the skinny on the shipment? If Blockbuster gets wind of a second heist, our butts are toast, bro!"

"Chill, Tommy," Mikey responded confidently. He was in his element. Mikey had an instinct for the blitz attack. That's why he'd been so successful during his most recent spate of child snatchings. In the past, he and Tommy tried to entice a kid to come with them. Now, Mikey just took them. Right off the streets.

The same thing with the heist. In the past, Tommy planned their jobs, carefully and meticulously. The brothers enjoyed a modicum of success, hitting pawn shops and liquor stores, businesses with goods easily fenced for quick money. When they first arrived in Bludhaven and were setting up shop in the abandoned low-rent apartment complex, Tommy planned their initial series of heists.

Mikey admired his little brother's ability to plan methodically and leave nothing to chance. But they needed the money they could get for fencing the stolen goods in these trucks. Since the stuff they were gonna steal was already stolen, there'd be no police report. The brothers would be home free.

Tommy saw their exit coming up. "That Vinnie guy said to meet him at the first major rest stop on West I-80. It should be about another two miles up."

Mikey turned to his brother and gently placed his hand on Tommy's arm. "It'll be all right, bro. You'll see...Everything's gonna be all right. I've always taken care of you, haven't I?"

Tommy thought sadly about Mikey's persistent mental downward slide. He was perfectly lucid at the moment, but his angry, almost murderous outbursts were escalating in their frequency. Soon, it would be impossible to control him.

"You're right, Mikey," Tommy said, reaching over and patting his brother affectionately on the leg. "You've always taken care of me, bro." He saw their turn coming up. "Here we go..."

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley checked his watch again. It was getting close to the agreed upon rendezvous time. He picked up his mike and gave his team a heads up.<p>

"All right, boys and girls! On your toes, 'cause it's gonna get noisy in a few minutes. Jennings, your boys in place?"

"Uniforms in place, Mac. How about those overpaid, overdressed, pretty boys of yours with the manicured nails?" Jennings winked at Kelp, who brought his hand up to his head as if a headache was coming on. The Uniforms versus the Suits was an age-old rift in the BHPD.

"Don't know about the manicured nails, but I noticed Winters had a new 'do!" MacCauley replied easily, looking over at Winters who was sitting on the passenger side sipping a soda from an oversized fast food disposable cup. She gave him a sour look.

"Hey, is the good Lady Doc with you, Mac?" Jennings' voice sounded teasing over the radio. "Tell me, is she wearing White Linen? Doc, you wearing White Linen?" Winters almost choked on her soft drink.

"Jennings! How the hell do you know what kind of perfume I wear?" she demanded, half-laughing.

"Doc," Jennings' voice sounded hurt. "I'm a cop, remember? I make it my business to know these things."

"Ignore him, Doc," Kelp's voice broke in. "He hasn't been getting any at home, so he's acting like a--" Suddenly, the area was flooded with the low beams from a set of van headlights.

"This is it!" MacCauley broke in. "Move in, people!"

\* \* \*

><p>"I see headlights. It's getting ready to go down, partner," Nightwing reported.<p>

"Right," Batman responded. "Nightwing?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

"..." Nightwing paused, surprised. "Hey, 'Careful' is my middle name!"

"Nightwing!" Batman's no-nonsense voice broke in.

Uh-oh, Nightwing winced. "Yes, sir?"

"Good luck. Batman, out."

Nightwing let out a whoosh of air in relief. He turned to the task at hand. The plan was that when the hijackers arrived at the ambush point, the BHPD would close in on Blockbuster's goons before they had a chance to bring down the hijackers. MacCauley's men would make sure



that the hijackers got away while holding off the ambush party.

Nightwing's job was to hitch a ride with the hijackers, while Batman's was to follow at a safe distance. If everything went according to plan, hopefully before the night was over, Billy Grady would be back in his parents' arms safe and sound, and the Gunthers would be in custody.

\* \* \*

><p>Mikey casually tossed Tommy the brothers' assault weapon of choice, an AK47. They'd carried these babies on their previous heists, but hadn't been forced to use them. Most streetwise punks knew the kind of hurt the weapon's 7.62 millimeter rounds could do. The high-powered weapon could actually pierce light armor.<p>

As a result cops both hated and respected them, since the high-powered round could pierce their standard issue bulletproof vests.

Therefore, even if Blockbuster's goons tried to hide inside the truck's trailer, the AK47s' firepower would be able to penetrate. So far, the automatic weapons had acted more as a deterrent against any resistance, rather than as a murder weapon.

The brothers quickly put on bulletproof Kevlar vests, night vision goggles (NVGs), and heavy ammunition bandoleers. Mikey gave his little brother a cursory check to ensure he was ready, nodded curtly, then carefully opened the van doors.

\* \* \*

><p>The highway rest stop lay in quiet stillness. It was a carefully designed oasis, which offered an information kiosk, restrooms, and picnic tables scattered throughout a pleasant, lightly wooded area, for travel-weary motorists. The loveliness of the surroundings was lost on those who waited nervously, trigger fingers itching, foreheads beaded with sweat. Occasionally the unnatural quiet was broken by the sounds of passing traffic on the adjacent Interstate.<p>

It was the calm before the storm.

The silence was suddenly shattered by police bullhorns.

"This the BHPD! You're completely surrounded! Drop your weapons and put your hands up!"

Nightwing checked his chronometer. "Right on time," he said, admiringly. Staying in the protection afforded by the deep shadows, Nightwing quickly made his way towards the van. Taking up a position from where he could observe the action, he waited.

The Gunthers stopped in their tracks. Suddenly, they split in two, running in different directions.

"Take 'em, bro!" Mikey shouted.

"No prob! Eat this, pigs!" Tommy shouted. The night exploded with the

distinctive sounds of two Kalashnikov AK47 soviet-made assault rifles. The very air seemed to be raining 7.62 millimeter rounds! A loud scream pierced the night.

"GET DOWN! GET DOWN!" MacCauley shouted.

Their plan forgotten, Nightwing sprang into action. He couldn't allow anyone else to be injured or killed. As he moved, he felt something suddenly whiz past his head. He ducked instinctively, then saw that he wasn't the intended target. A batarang flew true to its mark, striking one of the gunmen on the temple.

"Aiii!" Tommy screamed, falling to his knees.

"TOMMY!" Mikey cried, running towards his brother, giving covering fire. "Hang on, bro! I'm coming!"

Seeing his opening, Nightwing was about to take off, when a dark figure swooped in, landing squarely on Mikey's back, knocking him down. Batman spun and kicked out viciously, connecting with his opponent's unprotected chin. Mikey went down like he'd been shot.

\* \* \*

><p>The BHPD quickly closed in on the truck with the stolen goods. SWAT members in dark jumpsuits, flak jackets, and helmets, heavily armed with military style assault rifles, stormed the truck, front and back. Sgt. Jennings, the senior uniformed officer on the scene, and his partner Officer Kelp led the assault. They both had Special Weapons Assault Team training and usually rotated through the SWAT roster at least quarterly to maintain their active status.<p>

The area around the truck was suddenly saturated with hot lead. Sprinting like a jackrabbit, Kelp dove under the truck, his heart beating rapidly. He was quickly joined by Jennings.

"God, I hate my job," Kelp muttered. Jennings turned and gave him a broad grin.

"What? You want to live forever?"

Kelp grinned weakly. "And miss all this?" he returned. Breathing in short, quick gasps, he asked, "What now, fearless leader?"

Jennings calmly removed a small rectangular packet from his ammo bandoleer. Plastique! He grinned wolfishly.

"Always have a Plan B!" he said.

Kelp gave him an admiring look. "That's why you're a sergeant, and I'm just a lowly beat cop!"

\* \* \*

><p>Nightwing waited impatiently for Batman's move. He saw Batman turn his back on his opponent. That was the opening Mikey needed. Lightning fast, Mikey swung his weapon and struck Batman on the back of his head. Batman obligingly went down on his knees. Not satisfied, Mikey then kicked him, first in the head, then the ribs with all the force he could muster.<p>

Nightwing winced at the punishment that his mentor was willingly taking.

"Mikey, we gotta get outta here, bro," Tommy said, desperately. He'd recovered sufficiently to stand up, but was still woozy from the hit to the head. Mikey quickly picked up Tommy's weapon. Then grabbing his brother by the arm, Mikey helped him back to the van, all the while saturating the area with hot lead. With Batman down, and the BHPD currently occupied, they could just make their getaway.

Slipping silently through the shadows, Nightwing waited, then as the Gunthers zoomed past him, he leaped onto the van's roof.

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as the Gunthers' van screeched towards the rest stop's exit ramp, Batman leaped to his feet, running. He hurried to where they'd parked Nightwing's latest addition to his crime-fighting inventory, his converted Robin Cycle. Nightwing's natural talent for automotive design and engineering resulted in a completely new bike.<p>

Sleekly black with a midnight blue racing stripe in the shape of a wing flying across the front and down the sides, the 'Wing cycle had enough horsepower to take on all comers in the Metropolis 500. At least, that was the somewhat exaggerated boast that Dick made when he'd showed it off earlier.

Besides a miniaturized racing engine, Nightwing also installed twin turbo rocket boosters for emergencies. Batman shook his head ruefully. This from a kid who still wouldn't clean his own room. He activated the bike's stealth tracking device. It immediately homed in on a micro-transmitter located in one of Nightwing's gauntlets.

\* \* \*

><p>"NOW!" Jennings shouted. The SWAT explosives man sprinted for cover just as the truck's double doors blew outwardly. Before the smoke cleared, the SWAT team was swarming all around the exterior of the truck's large storage compartment. The team automatically formed a cordon around the vehicle, weapons at ready.<p>

Jennings gave Kelp the go ahead signal. Kelp nodded, then motioned for two of the officers to join him. The three utilized classic evasion maneuvers as they cautiously approached the truck's opening. Kelp held up his hand, then signaled "one, two, three" with his fingers. As soon as Kelp reached "three," he and the other two officers vaulted onto the back.

Kelp immediately felt a warning signal go off in his head. He quickly scanned the trailer, his weapon ready. Empty. Nothing. Nada. Not even one G.I. Joe. He reached up for his mike.

"Boss, something ain't kosher! Place is empty," he reported. "Wait! I see something."

"What? Kelp, what is it?" Jennings' insistent voice came over his ear receiver.

"A light of some kind. Small, red, and it's blinking...Uh-oh!"

"KELP! GET OUT OF THERE! NOW!" Jennings' voice screamed in his ear, but Kelp was already running towards the van doors.

"CLEAR OUT!" he screamed. Officers standing outside the truck suddenly took off, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the truck.

As Kelp and the other two officers went flying out the back doors, the whole thing blew up behind them.

Kelp felt himself lifted as if by a pair of powerful hands and hurled bodily. As the wind rushed against his face, he had the oddest sensation that he was flying. Funny, I wonder if this how Batman feels, he thought. Then blackness claimed him...

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as Batman left in his souped-up "Batcycle," MacCauley and his team of "overdressed" investigators took off after him. Jennings could handle this end of things without MacCauley or his detectives. Besides, this was MacCauley's murder investigation, and he would be damned if some guy in a spooky batsuit was gonna take his collar.<p>

MacCauley wanted the Gunthers. He wanted them real bad.

As MacCauley concentrated on his driving, thoughts of his earlier meeting with the two vigilantes kept intruding. There was something about them that kept niggling at his subconscious...

The "Batcycle" suddenly pulled ahead.

Whoa! MacCauley's mind came whipping back to the present. That Batguy was really flying! MacCauley almost couldn't keep up. He pushed down on the gas pedal, gunning the engine to over 100 mph. MacCauley thanked The Powers That Be that had decided to procure these super-turbocharged, wide-bodied sports vehicles for the BHPD fleet.

These babies were a far cry from those boxy-looking 1940s jobbies that they'd had before. This beauty could really roll! But MacCauley was still having problems keeping up with the Bat. At last, he spotted the twin, turbo exhausts up ahead from the "Batcycle." MacCauley settled back down, again.

"Lauren?" MacCauley said tentatively.

"Yeah?"

"I know this sounds really crazy," MacCauley said hesitantly, "but I can't help shaking the feeling that Batman and Nightwing remind me of someone."

"Yeah," Winters said. "Someone right out of Friday the Thirteenth!" She shivered. "Especially that Batman! Did you see how he just seemed to appear out of no where?"

MacCauley grinned, nodding. "Nightwing's all right, though. Seems like a nice enough kid, actually, if a little snot-nosed. But, you're right, Batman's right up there with Freddy Kruger!"

"What's the matter, David?" Winters teased, agreeing with him, but nevertheless laughing at the ludicrous image. "Has Davey been forcing you to watch horror movies again?"

"Natalie calls it 'quality time,'" David said smiling sheepishly. "I don't know why, though...I mean, I end up watching half the movie with my eyes closed!"

"How To Filet Your Neighbor In Ten Easy Steps," Winters said, snorting softly. "Yeah, I can see why your wife would view this as a warm and touching moment!"

"What I can't figure," MacCauley said, semi-awed, "is how Jim Gordon has managed to work with Batman all of these years? I mean, I've only met the Bat once, and I'm still shaking from the experience."

"Maybe it's because Gordon knows who the man behind the mask actually is!" Winters replied, shrugging.

MacCauley looked at her speculatively.

"Lauren, I know this sounds incredibly stupid, but..." He shook his head suddenly, struck by the ridiculous thought. "Oh, forget it!" he said, instead.

But the nagging idea wouldn't leave MacCauley's head. Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson: Batman and Nightwing! Sheesh! David MacCauley, you're out of your friggin' mind! He turned back to his driving.

The unmarked vehicle moved quickly through the night in silent pursuit of a man who looked like a living nightmare, who was himself in pursuit of two human monsters...

\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

## ><p><strong>Chapter Fifteen<strong>

The waterfront "D" Street Projects were a '70s experiment in social engineering that failed. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded matching funds to the City of Bludhaven to provide a self-governing, low rent apartment complex in a beautiful bayside setting for its lower income citizens. While the project was initiated with much fanfare, it never actually came to fruition.

Between contract disputes, poor engineering specs, high employee accident rates, and missed milestones, the project went bankrupt. Today, the empty skeletons of the finished buildings stood as a sad monument to the rampant organized corruption of Bludhaven City officials.

As the van moved slowly through the winding streets of the abandoned neighborhood, Nightwing looked around, amazed at the prime waterfront

property that was going to waste. Even with the thousands of former Gothamites swarming into Bludhaven and in need of proper housing, the local city government still hadn't done anything to renew this project. Nightwing shook his head in disgust.

"I guess you really can't fight City Hall," he muttered.

The van eventually pulled up to what would have obviously been an underground parking facility. As the van wended its way carefully around discarded rubble from abandoned building materials, Nightwing couldn't believe what he was seeing. This place was almost entirely finished! With just a few additional dollars, the City could actually complete it and make housing available to hundreds.

Why wouldn't they, Nightwing wondered? He slapped his forehead. Duh! Come on, Grayson, this is Bludhaven, remember? Still, maybe if he dropped a dime with a certain billionaire philanthropist that he knew? After all, Bruce would then be helping out his displaced Gothamites, wouldn't he?

As the van crept to a stop, Nightwing looked around, and spotting a likely hiding place near the ceiling rafters, he leaped into the shadows in a single graceful motion.

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as Batman saw that the van was pulling into the abandoned water front projects, he parked the 'Wing cycle in the shadows and took to the rooftops. Keeping the van in sight, he glided easily through the night. Adjusting his mask's built-in Starlite lenses, he spotted Nightwing still clinging to the van's roof.<p>

Batman took a moment to smile slightly. He felt a momentary flash of pride at the sight of his adopted son, who'd obviously grown into his own here in Bludhaven. He recalled the comment that Al the Eraser made to Nightwing: "Bludhaven's your town, kid!"

"He's right, 'kid'. Bludhaven is your town!"

The van drove into an underground parking garage. Batman leaped into the night...

\* \* \*

><p>"Sound off!" Jennings called.<p>

"Garcia!"

"Thompkins!"

"Lee!"

Steadily each of the twelve members of the SWAT team reported in, until two names remained unaccounted for.

"Kelp! Roberts!" Jennings called. "Report!" Silence. "Kelp!" No reply. "Okay, people! Spread out! Three hundred sixty degree search radius! We have two officers down!" Jennings turned to his electronics specialist. "Thompkins!"

"Yo, Sarge!" Thompkins came running up.

"See what you can do about the magnesium lights! Maybe the mopes just pulled a switch and didn't blow 'em out or something."

"I'm on it!" Thompkins took off.

Jennings double-timed to the SWAT van. He immediately put out the radio call.

"This is SWAT ONE! We've had an explosion here! I have two officers unaccounted for. I need the bomb squad and Emergency Rescue ASAP at the Interstate Eighty-West Rest Stop located off Exit Two. Repeat. I need the bomb squad and Emergency Rescue...!"

MacCauley's voice came on immediately afterwards.

"SWAT ONE, who are the missing officers?"

"Corporal Roberts and..." Jennings paused. "Corporal Roberts and Officer Kelp."

"Sergeant Jennings!" Officer Lee, a young female rookie waved to him. "We've found Corporal Roberts! He's hurt bad...took a round in the shoulder, and he's lost a lot of blood!"

Jennings ran up to where Roberts was lying prostrate on the ground.

"Robbie," Jennings said quietly. "You trying to be a hero again?" Roberts grimaced from the pain.

"Damned Army surplus flak jackets," Roberts gasped. "Can't stop a peashooter...how can they be expected to stop a seven point six-two round...?"

"Hey, now...we got those nifty new cars, didn't we? Can't expect City Hall to cough up more money to replace a perfectly good, if worthless, vest! After all, you know what they say..." They both finished together.

"You can't fight City Hall!" Robbie grinned through the pain, struggling to maintain his hold on reality, but eventually lost the battle.

Jennings studied him for a long moment. Finally, he turned to Lee. "Do what you can for him..." Lee nodded.

The area was suddenly bathed with the bright, almost blue-white light from high wattage magnesium floodlights. At least one thing was going right for them, Jennings thought.

"Sarge! We found Kelp!"

Jennings sprinted in the direction of the voice. Oh, God, please don't let me be too late!

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley parked the unmarked cruiser in the shadows between two abandoned apartment buildings. He'd seen the van's taillights disappear into an underground garage. MacCauley signaled the tail vehicle to come up behind him.<p>

"Lauren, were you able to pull up the old building plans?"

Winters looked up from the small monitor she was closely studying. She nodded distractedly. As the Chief of the Violent Crimes Division, MacCauley rated a laptop computer installed in his cruiser. The system was fully networked with the BHPD and, if one knew the access codes, or knew how to gain access, the City's secure system was also available.

"Yeah, the architectural group, East End Construction, managed to meet at least one milestone," she said ruefully. "They filed their plans with the City Planning Commission, and then didn't seem to do anything else." She hurriedly keyed in a few commands.

"Give me another sec..." She typed some more. "That's it!" Winters looked up with a small grin.

The carload of officers in jackets with the letters BHPD boldly written across the back emerged. MacCauley quickly set up a command post on the trunk of his vehicle. He placed the laptop on the car, and the officers gathered around him.

"Phil, you and Marty will take up positions here and here..."

\* \* \*

><p>Billy heard noises outside his door. His heart started beating rapidly, his breaths came in short, quick gasps. He moved as far to the corner of the bed as he could. Mikey handcuffed him to the bed before they'd left, and Billy had rubbed his tiny wrist raw from trying to squeeze his hand through it.<p>

The cuffs were wet with blood already, making them very slippery. However, he just couldn't slip his hand through. Billy felt the tears start spilling again. The sobs came faster. He quickly hid his head under the pillow, so that the monsters wouldn't hear him.

\* \* \*

><p>Mikey eased Tommy onto the couch. Tommy kept slipping in and out of consciousness. He'd be all right, but would have a terrible headache in the morning. Mikey could already see a discoloration where the thing--one of those Bat throwing toys of the Batman's--struck his brother!<p>

Mikey was strangely excited. The Bat was here! Here in Bludhaven! That meant that Dicky was probably with him. Mikey didn't see the kid, Robin, with Batman, but then...Mikey thought confusedly. Robin wouldn't be a little boy anymore, would he? Dicky wouldn't be his beautiful little boy...he'd be a grown man.

"No! Dicky's coming back to me! He'll be here soon, and I'm gonna have to have the place ready for him." Mikey thought about the little boy in the back. He stood in the middle of room, his mind whirling with all of the conflicting images.



"But I have him already," Mikey said smiling. "Dicky's here already, and..." he paused again, thinking. "And tomorrow I get to show him how much I love him. Tommy said that's okay. It's the in the rules!" Mikey felt a thrill surge through him. "Dicky will be mine tomorrow!"

"Don't count on it, scumbag!"

\* \* \*

><p>Mikey whirled around, diving for where he'd carelessly dropped the AK47s in the middle of the floor. As his hands clasped around one of the weapons, a heavily booted foot came down--hard!--on his wrist!<p>

"Aiii!" Mikey yelped at the unexpected sharp pain.

"That's cheating, Mikey," the voice above him taunted. "I thought you liked to play by the rules?"

Mikey looked up from where he knelt cowering. A young man of slightly above average height stood over him. He had dark, almost midnight black hair and was wearing a matching black costume, with a midnight blue stylized wing across his well-developed chest. The young man's eyes were camouflaged behind the black, bat-like mask he wore.

Bat-like? Mikey looked at him, frightened.

"Y-y-you're that Nightwing guy that the local mooks talk about," he said, gasping. Mikey was holding his wrist closely to his chest. "My wrist...I think you broke my wrist." His voice sounded like a small child in pain.

"Really?" Nightwing asked disinterestedly. "Gee, I'm sorry. Now I'm gonna have real trouble sleeping at nights, y'know?"

Mikey started feeling angry. "You hurt me, man! I need a doctor! You hear me? I need a doctor!"

"You're gonna need a mortician," Nightwing growled, "if you don't tell me where you're keeping Billy Grady!"

"Billy?" Mikey looked genuinely confused. "I don't know any Billy."

Nightwing squinted his eyes, disbelievingly. He bent down and roughly grabbed Mikey by the collar. Nightwing pulled his right arm back, preparing to throw a punch, when he felt a sudden explosive pain in the back of his head. As Nightwing felt the world close around him, he became vaguely aware that Tommy was standing there calmly, holding a baseball bat in his hands. That was the last thing he knew for a while.

\* \* \*

><p>As he lay in the dark, confusing images swirled within the black recesses of his mind. Threatening voices kept coming in and out of his hearing. Voices that caused hurt each time they came within

range. One Voice in particular took special pleasure in causing pain. A Voice from the past...a Voice who'd hurt him a long time ago...<p>

When Nightwing finally regained consciousness, his innate sense of time told him that he'd only been out for about a half-hour. In that time a few things had changed. He was no longer Nightwing. He was now Dick Grayson. Nightwing had been completely stripped of everything, except for his briefs. He was sitting on a cold, damp floor in a room with a single overhead bare bulb.

Dick looked around the room and immediately wished he hadn't. It was a veritable Chamber of Horrors. From his low angle on the floor, he couldn't see everything in the room, but he could imagine what he didn't see. The wall and floor opposite him were covered in dark stains. His experienced eyes recognized the stains as blood.

A shiny metal examination table in the middle of the room gave him added chills. Its very immaculateness was even more frightening than the filthy walls. A smaller table next to it held a variety of instruments whose purposes he didn't want to know.

And the smell! The smell finally made itself known to his conscious awareness. It had been there all along. He just hadn't been cognizant of it. Now he knew what it was. The smell of decaying human flesh...once experienced, never forgotten. Dick felt his throat gag involuntarily.

"Okay, Grayson, I think it would be a very good idea if you got out of here! Time to test the cage!"

Dick immediately tried moving his arms. He was elaborately handcuffed and chained to the wall. The chain had sufficient play to allow him to raise and lower his arms, but he was pretty much immobilized. His right ankle was chained to a heavy eye-ring solidly bolted to the floor.

"Okay, so much for standing," Dick muttered. He reached tentatively to his face, and wasn't really surprised that his mask was gone.

"Great! Naked and unmasked! Sounds like a bad "B" movie!"

Dick winced at the sudden pain that shot up from his midriff when he moved his arms. He looked down and examined his rib area. A deep discoloration was already spreading across his abdomen.

"Probably kicked me when I was out," he said ruefully. Then, wincing at the sharp pain, added, "Several times." Dick could also feel a deep pulse-pounding ache from the back of his head.

"Could be worse," Dick thought, facetiously, fighting the pain and reaching inside his briefs. "I could've forgotten to wear clean underwear! What would Alfred have said then?"

\* \* \*

><p>"Master Dick," Alfred's droll voice broke in. "The well-dressed young superhero always changes his underwear before going out on a case!"<p>

"Huh?" Ten-year-old Robin looked at him like he was joking!

"One never knows, young sir, when one might meet with serious injury and require medical attention. I won't have you causing a scandal in the superhero community by wearing dirty shorts!"

Alfred calmly held out a clean pair of briefs.

"Now, hurry it up! Master Bruce is waiting quite impatiently!"

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Robin asked grabbing the briefs and running into the uniform vault to change. "What's next?" he wondered aloud. "Do all us 'well-dressed young superheroes' have to brush our teeth first before we go chasing after crooks, too? Sheesh!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Thanks for the reminder, Alfred," Dick said softly. He quickly found the skeleton key he'd hidden inside the elastic waistband of his briefs, and began working on his handcuffs.<p>

Hearing noises coming in his direction, Dick managed to break free of the manacles in record time. "Dick Grayson, Master Escape Artist!" he quipped.

\* \* \*

><p>When Batman entered the underground garage, he saw no sign of the Gunthers or Nightwing. As he cautiously dropped down to the third parking level, the lowest in the facility, Batman couldn't quite shrug off the feeling that he was descending into hell. He found the van under a painter's tarpaulin in a gloomy corner of the garage.<p>

There were three exits leading out of the garage to the upper living areas, coinciding with the three apartment buildings radiating out from the central parking facility. Batman's eyes squinted as he studied the area.

Touching a special pressure point on his cowl, his NVGs ran a spectral analysis of the three doors. He allowed himself a small smile. On the door leading to the West Wing, was one of Nightwing's miniature calling cards. Batman reached for the doorknob...

\* \* \*

><p>"Let's go!" MacCauley ordered. The officers comprising the Bludhaven Child Murders Taskforce took off at a run. Keeping close to the shadows afforded by the dozens of empty buildings, they moved stealthily towards the underground garage entrance. His two sharpshooters separated, heading towards their vantage points.<p>

Winters stayed close to MacCauley. Against his protests, she'd insisted on accompanying the taskforce in the capacity of an official observer. Winters wanted to be present when they recovered Billy Grady. She felt that the traumatized boy would need immediate psychiatric care to help him through the days ahead.

As they moved silently to the entrance point, Winters thought back on her earlier conversation with MacCauley in his office about Cadet Grayson...

"I suppose that the only way Dick was able to face the psychological trauma was by blocking it out. Poor kid. It's emotionally draining enough to face one major trauma in your life, but two at once?" Winters shook her admiringly. "That Dick developed into the fine young man he is, shows a strength of character that's almost superhuman!"

MacCauley laughed at her exaggeration. "So, are you trying to tell me that Cadet Grayson is, in fact, that new kid superhero, Superboy?" MacCauley held his hands out, as if to stop the horror. "No, thanks! One spandex-clad hero in Bludhaven is about all this old cop will be able to take! At least Nightwing is only human. I think..."

As Winters followed closely behind MacCauley, she vowed silently that Billy would receive the best professional assistance available to help him through the rough road ahead.

**\*\*End of Part 8\*\***

## 9. Chapter 16 & Epilogue

### **\*\*Chapter Sixteen\*\***

As soon as Dick freed himself and stood up, he spotted his Nightwing costume on the metal table. He grabbed it and quickly began shrugging into his top and bottoms, dressing faster than ever before.

"At least I won't cause a scandal throughout the superhero community by being caught with my pants down," Dick said ruefully. He quickly pulled on his boots and gauntlets, finishing his transformation into Nightwing in near record time. The only item missing was the mask.

"Oh, joy! Batman will be really happy about that!"

The voices outside were closing in! Nightwing looked quickly around the room looking for a hiding place or a way out. He looked up at the ceiling...

\* \* \*

><p>The door flew open as Mikey and Tommy both stormed in. Tommy hesitated at the door. He hated to come into the Punishment Room. When Tommy saw what Mikey could do when the blackness within him awakened, Tommy cringed in fear of his brother.<p>

Mikey stopped midway. "Where is he? He's gone!" Mikey ran to the shackles lying open on the floor. He whirled on his brother, his eyes smoldering embers.

Tommy saw that Mikey had a wild, crazy glint in his eyes...Just like Daddy!

"I told you to make sure the cuffs were locked!" Mikey raged. "I TOLD

you! CAN'T YOU DO ANYTHING RIGHT, YOU WORTHLESS PIECE OF SH--"

--MIKEY! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" Tommy cried out, grabbing his brother by the shoulders. "Bro...What are you saying?"

Mikey stared at his brother, his eyes filling with tears. He began crying in wrenching, heartbreaking sobs. He began speaking quietly, almost singsong. Tommy realized with cold dread, that Mikey sounded just like Mommy used to before she locked them up in the basement.

"I try to be reasonable...I cook...I clean...I pick up after you..." Mikey's voice was steadily rising in volume and pitch. "All I ask is FOR A LITTLE SUPPORT!!" Mikey suddenly and powerfully backhanded Tommy, catching his brother by surprise, sending him crashing across the metal examination table. Everything went toppling over in a resounding crash.

"NOW SEE WHAT YOU DID!!" Mikey screamed. "NOW I'M GONNA HAVE TO REALLY PUNISH YOU!"

Tommy tried crab crawling backwards, but he was too terrified and mesmerized by his brother's sudden transformation. Mikey grabbed a razor sharp ten-inch carving knife.

"No! Mikey, please! Don't! You're my brother...I love you, bro. I love you..." Tommy whimpered.

"Don't you know that you always hurt the ones you love?" Mikey asked, smiling kindly.

Tommy lost his self-control, wetting himself. It was Mommy! Mommy had come back!

"NO, MOMMY! NO! I'LL BE GOOD...I PROMISE!" Tommy screamed, retreating.

Mikey looked at the spreading wet stain in Tommy's pants, and shook his head, tsk-tsking.

"Awww...has widdle Tommy wet his widdle pants?" Mikey shook his finger at his brother. "Naughty, naughty. I'm afraid that I'm gonna have to put you in the closet."

Tommy screamed!

\* \* \*

><p>Batman heard the bloodcurdling scream from four floors away! Nightwing! He ran towards the fire doors at the end of the hallway, and slammed into the safety bar with his momentum. The door didn't open and Batman was thrown back with a force that was equal to his forward momentum. The door was either blocked or locked from the other side. He had to find another way up!<p>

He was about to run back to the other end of the hallway, when another animal-like scream echoed through the empty corridors. No time! Batman spun around and kicked in one of the apartment doors that lined the hallway. He made his way quickly through the empty

rooms until he found a window.

Batman hurriedly climbed out, shot a jumpline, then proceeded to make his way up the next few floors. As he flew up, Batman tried not to think about the person who might have cried out in such raw terror. When he passed the floor he believed the scream came from, Batman stopped his ascent. He took out a strange looking instrument from his utility belt: it was comprised of a suction cup, which adhered easily to the windowpane, and a glasscutter.

Batman cut a circle through the pane, carefully removed it, then reached his hand in and unlocked the window from the inside. Batman silently opened the window and quietly made his way through the empty apartment. He opened the door into the outer corridor, checked it quickly, then crossed with no more than a whisper to the fire doors. Approaching the safety doors with a little more care this time, Batman pushed at the safety bar and was gratified that it opened into the adjoining staircase.

\* \* \*

><p>When the task force arrived at the three exits in the underground garage, MacCauley split them up into three groups: Two groups of two and one group of three. MacCauley and Winters, joined by another officer, Detective Fontana, moved cautiously down the endless corridors.<p>

They were being meticulous in their search, checking each apartment. When they first began, MacCauley and Fontana made a great show of approaching each door with extreme caution, then taking turns kicking it down. As they entered the empty apartments, MacCauley would assume a standing firing stance, covering the left, while Fontana would kneel and cover the right.

Shortly after the fifth door they'd broken down, Winters discovered that the doors weren't locked. In fact, they discovered that the knobs were all missing the locking mechanisms. MacCauley and Fontana scratched the backs of their heads in embarrassment.

From there on, everything sped up. They cleared the first floor in record time, then proceeded to the second. They were halfway through the third floor, when a scream that by all rights should only be heard in a drive-in theater froze them momentarily in their tracks!

All three officers looked up as if by sheer force of will, they could see through the interconnecting ceilings above them.

"Let's go!" MacCauley said, snapping out of his momentary shock. The three officers quickly ran to the end of the corridor and the fire doors. MacCauley didn't slow down as he approached the safety doors. Instead, he allowed his forward momentum to push the bar, and he the others seemed to fly through the door and up the stairs.

\* \* \*

><p>The first door Batman tried, once he entered the converted apartment, was locked. Taking out a mini-cutting flare, Batman quickly melted through the door's locking mechanism. Opening the door, Batman moved like a wraith, disappearing into the concealing

shadows within the room.<p>

"Who's there?" a frightened, young voice called. Batman adjusted his NVGs and instantly saw a small figure huddled on the far corner of the bed. Billy Grady! Not stopping to think, Batman quickly crossed over to where the little boy was shackled to the bed.

"Who is it?" Billy's voice sounded close to hysteria.

"A friend," Batman said. When Batman approached the bed, the boy screamed at the sight of an even greater horror than Mikey or Tommy had ever seemed. Billy started panicking, kicking out with his legs, anything to avoid falling into the hands of this new monster!

"Billy," Batman said surprisingly gently. "Son, I'm here to help you. Billy, please, let me set you free."

"NO!!" Billy screamed in panic-stricken terror. "Stay away from me! I want my mommy! I WANT MY MOMMY!"

"Maybe I'd better handle this!" Batman spun at the voice behind him. Winters was standing uncertainly in the open doorway. "He's too young to understand that you're a friend, Batman. I'm afraid that symbol you've selected to wear is a double-edged sword. It may frighten the criminals you wage war on, but it also frightens the very people you wish to help. This is the result."

Winters pointed with her chin at Billy's tiny, cowering figure. Batman looked at the small boy for a few moments, remembering another little boy whom he'd frightened at first. Another bloodcurdling scream rang through the apartment complex. Startled, both Batman and Winters turned in the direction it came from.

"Take care of him, Doctor Winters," Batman said and rushed out the door.

Winters watched as Batman moved out, a dark shadow flitting through the darker recesses of the human soul. A brokenhearted sob caught her ear and her heart, and she hurried over to the small child who'd already suffered more horrors and frights than anyone ever should in a single lifetime.

As Batman ran down the corridor, his enhanced vision picked up something on the floor, which caused his blood to run cold. Nightwing's mask!

\* \* \*

><p>MacCauley and Fontana were searching the rest of the converted apartment when they heard the scream. It came from several doors down! Weapons drawn, they ran out into the darkened corridor.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>...Watching from between the ceiling tiles, Nightwing waited for his chance. He was about to jump through the tiles when the Gunthers rushed in, but noticing that something strange was happening, he held back. To Nightwing's increasing astonishment, he watched as Mikey transformed into an entirely new personality.<p>

Mikey's voice went up an octave, and he suddenly turned on a terrified Tommy with a ten-inch blade. Rather, than fighting back, Tommy simply cowered on the floor, waiting for the inevitable blow.

"NO! MOMMY, I'LL BE GOOD! I PROMISE!" Tommy sobbed. "DON'T HURT ME AGAIN, PLEEEASSSE!"

Mikey's only response was an almost gentle crooning in a singsong lullaby, all the while brandishing the ten-inch blade. "You've been naughty, Tommmmeeee! I'm gonna have to punish youuuuu!" Mikey approached his brother with loving tenderness. "Tommy, don't cry...I'll take care of you. Remember, you only hurt the ones you love."

Tommy let out a bloodcurdling scream that chilled Nightwing's bones.

Tommy turned on his side, and started crawling weakly away. His legs seemed to be frozen by his fear, unable to move. He couldn't get up; all he could do was attempt to pull himself slowly out the door by his hands.

As Mikey came up to his brother, he raised the knife high, then brought it down with all the force he could put into it! As the knife began to come down, a steamroller barreled into Mikey, knocking him down and jarring the knife from his hands. Tommy turned at the last moment and saw the superhero kid slam into Mikey.

Nightwing didn't hesitate. Mikey was extremely dangerous...Nightwing grew up fighting insane fiends like the Joker and Two Face. Mikey was acting like a close copy. Leaping, spinning, kicking, and punching, Nightwing did not let up his relentless attack on his dangerous opponent. Unexpectedly, he was suddenly struck from behind between the shoulder blades.

Nightwing felt the earth weave crazily, then settle down again.

"Don't hurt my brother!" Nightwing spun out of the way, just as Tommy swung the baseball bat through the empty space that Nightwing's head had recently occupied. "No one hurts my brother! No one!" Tommy yelled, swinging at Nightwing.

"Mikey!" Tommy yelled, never taking his eyes off Nightwing. "Are you all right, bro?" As Tommy called to his brother, he kept his deadly swings aimed at Nightwing.

Nightwing kept ducking and rolling out of the way, glad that he didn't have Tommy's full attention. He was still a little light-headed from the earlier blow to the head.

Mikey sat up from where he'd crumpled under Nightwing's assault. He blinked several times to clear his eyes. He saw that Tommy was currently occupied. His eyes narrowed at the sight of his naughty brother.

"All I ask is for a little support," Mikey muttered. "I cook..."



Mikey slowly stood up.

"I clean..."

Mikey picked up the knife.

"I pick up after you..."

Mikey started walking slowly up behind Tommy, who solidly connected with Nightwing's hurt ribs. The young vigilante went down on his knees, gasping at the searing pain, trying to clear his head. Nightwing looked up.

"Why can't you be good?" Mikey asked, sounding hurt and tired.

Nightwing's eyes widened. "Look out!" he warned.

Too late! In a frenzy, Mikey lunged at his brother and repeatedly stabbed him.

Tommy screamed! He couldn't understand why he suddenly felt as if someone were running a white-hot poker through his body. His face assumed a look of hurt shock.

"What hap--?" Tommy gurgled, choking as his lungs quickly filled with his own blood.

Mikey, who was standing behind his brother, holding the bloodied knife in his hands, caught Tommy gently in his arms, and began to rock him. "There, there, Tommy," Mikey crooned. "Don't worry, little brother...I'll take care of you...Haven't I always?"

"Why...?" Tommy choked, pink bubbles escaping from the side of his mouth. "Why...?"

"Because, Tommy," Mikey explained patiently, "how many times do I gotta tell you? You always hurt the ones you love?" Mikey began rocking Tommy gently. "Shhhhh, little brother. Don't worry. I'll take care of you..."

\* \* \*

><p>Nightwing gently, but firmly removed the knife from Mikey's hand.<p>

He reached over and checked Tommy's pulse. He was gone. Mikey kept rocking his little brother and crooning quietly to him. Nightwing wasn't exactly sure what he'd witnessed, but he was certain that whatever monsters had haunted him all of these years, the Gunthers' personal demons had been much worse.

Nightwing wasn't a psychologist, but he was fairly sure that Mikey belonged in a hospital, not in a prison. He heard the sounds of running feet coming up the corridor.

"The last thing I need is to be caught without my mask," he muttered. Leaping up in a single fluid motion, Nightwing grasped a ceiling beam and pulled himself up. He quickly covered over the ceiling tile,

leaving a tiny crack.

"Aw, jeez," MacCauley muttered, taking in the scene. It looked like something out of Dante's Inferno. There was blood everywhere! On the floor. On the walls. On the ceiling tiles. And sitting in the middle of the floor almost entirely covered in blood were the Gunther brothers. One was holding the other closely to him, rocking him back and forth.

And the smell!

MacCauley felt himself gagging!

"My God--!" Fontana gasped, awe-struck.

Both veteran officers stood silently by as Mikey rocked and crooned his little brother to sleep.

Nightwing watched for a few minutes, then made his way carefully on hands and knees through the crawlspace to another apartment.

\* \* \*

><p>"Good thing these projects were never finished," he said sarcastically. "These false ceilings would've been a great way to break into your neighbors' homes."<p>

"You're right, but with a little redesigning and improved specs, who knows, they could solve Bludhaven's housing shortage problem."

At the first words, Nightwing almost fell through the ceiling tiles into the apartment below.

"You know," Nightwing squeaked, "I think you really enjoy doing that!"

"Doing what?"

"..." Nightwing looked nonplussed. "Aw, never mind," he said holding his head in his hand. "I'm just doomed to go through life with a twitch, I guess."

"By the way," Batman asked. "Did you lose this?" Nightwing turned around carefully. He could've sworn he heard a smile in Batman's voice. Just like...where had he heard something like this before, he wondered?

Batman was holding out Nightwing's mask. Sheepishly, Nightwing took it back.

"Did they see your face?" Batman asked. Nightwing sighed.

"Yeah, and just about everything else." He quickly explained his state of undress when he'd first awakened, and then recounted all of the events since. "So, I don't think my secret identity is any trouble. Mikey isn't going to be saying anything that anyone is going to believe for a very long time."

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><p><strong>Epilogue<strong>

The scene below was one of organized chaos. Dozens of emergency vehicles with blue, red, and yellow lights flashing had converged on the abandoned apartment complex. As soon as word spread that Billy Grady had been found alive and the child serial killers captured, reporters from every major news outlet began arriving.

Nightwing crouched easily on the edge of the roof. He was monitoring the police band for any further news on the injured police officers. Hearing what he wanted, Nightwing finally looked up and gave his mentor a relieved smile.

"Sergeant Jennings just reported that both Corporal Roberts and Officer Kelp are gonna make it."

"I'm glad to hear it," Batman said simply.

Sudden activity below them caught their attention. A three-car police motorcade came pulling up to the police line. The crowds were forced to open up and make way for the vehicles. There was a sudden stillness in the air...almost as if a director had yelled "Cut!" and everything on the set had come to a halt.

The rear door of the middle cruiser opened, and two people emerged, standing uncertainly in the center of the crowds around them. Suddenly, from the rear of one of the EMT vehicles, Doctor Winters climbed out, calmly carrying a small bundle in her arms. She began walking slowly to the waiting couple who stood seemingly unable to move.

"Mommy! Daddy!" Billy's voice called out to them.

With a sudden cry, Deana and Ted Grady ran towards Winters, and eagerly took their son into their waiting arms.

Watching from the sidelines, MacCauley smiled at Winters. "Sometimes, everything seems worth it, Doc. The long hours, the lousy pay..."

"Yes," Winters agreed. "But the suffering, David...especially of the children...the ones we couldn't save..." Winters stopped, unable to go on. She felt emotionally drained.

In answer, MacCauley placed his hand gently on her elbow, and began steering her towards his cruiser.

"Come on, Doc. I'll buy you a drink..."

\* \* \*

><p>"Will you be you heading back tonight?" Nightwing asked.<p>

"My job here is done. I'm not needed anymore," Batman replied quietly.

"Bruce?" Nightwing stood, looking up his mentor. "Thanks for coming." When Batman didn't say anything in reply, Nightwing dropped his eyes

and stood uncertainly. Feeling a warm pressure on his shoulder, Nightwing eagerly looked up and almost blinded his mentor with a nova-bright smile.

"Like I said...What are fathers for?" Batman replied.

**\*\*The End\*\***

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file.